CHAPTER 3

WOMENLORE
INTRODUCTION

In the course of socio-political history of mankind, it has been noticed that women hold half the sky with men. In fact, the role of women as a social coagulative force and also their creative undertaking can never be refuted even under the patriarchal social system. Under the matrilineal system women played much more decisive role than under the patriarchy. But under patriarchy, though women were subjugated and ruthlessly subordinated by men, yet they continued to play an indispensable role in every aspect of life. Be it domestic or external, defensive or offensive in warfare, they played significant role in state affairs. Their social contribution is probably much more remarkable than their opposite sex. The feminine characters with extraordinary skill, heroic deeds, sense of justice, and dedicative spirit for the well-being of others could naturally win the hearts of their countrymen. These extraordinary personages lived and still continue to live amidst numerous legends. Rather, it was the common man, who, out of adoration, created such legends that virtually made the figures immortal. On the other hand, the evil-charactered figures were uglified.

3.1 CHINESE WOMENLORE: NARRATION

In China, there are legends that reflect the role of women as a significant factor in shaping almost everything in life. Artistic skill, martial arts, diplomacy, statesmanship were not exclusive domains for men. Women were equally good or even better than men. Legends grew around women who fought against oppressive forces and won justice for the people.

There are also stories that preach ethics to be followed by women. These in modern terms would seem utterly feudal and inhuman. When ethical norms were broken, wives were subjected to physical and mental torture, social ostracism, or even torments that resulted in death. Ever since monogamy was introduced, women have been expected to toe the line of patriarchal notions of chastity. It was man who set the standard for judging a woman's beauty. In case of fulfilment of such standard, women were eulogized.
or even elevated to new celestial height. At times, they were even venerated like goddesses. If far from the set standard, they were simply given ugly names in order to remind people of their particular drawbacks and points of weaknesses. Stories relating the sufferings of women are not few. Instances of trampling of women’s dignity, or sacrificing them for 'greater cause' are uncountable.

There are yet other stories that tell us of pure love and mutual respect between lovers. There are stories of good mothers who were concerned and devoted to education of their sons. Education was considered out of bounds for women. But the women who chose to break away with such patriarchal notion, and reached a high level of scholarship were considered women of great learning. They were spontaneously given important status in society.

Most of the Chinese stories on women centre round quasi-historical characters. They might have lived in this world, and were definitely made of flesh and blood. In the process of admiration, these characters were painted with colours of fantasy. In the course of several centuries, they lost their original names and ordinary human characteristics. On the contrary, they acquired unparalleled divine qualities. There are also quite a few historical characters who gained prominence at their times. They too were decorated with garlands of legendary fantasy either by people of contemporary era or by those of a later period.

Although it is difficult to classify women strictly under specific categories, yet we would make a broad classification keeping in mind some salient features of the characters:

1. Women of Skill, Learning and Wisdom;
2. Women of Patriotism, Courage and Self-Sacrifice;
3. Sincere Love and Feudal Domination;
4. Filial Piety;
5. Beauties from History.
1. **Women of Skill, Learning and Wisdom**

Under this category we would examine the scholarly women, women of wits, women with excellent artistic skill and also those who inspired or urged their sons to advance in life through diligence. The wisdom of such mothers was of a different nature because they carved out the future of their sons and contributed much to their greatness. The stories about women of ready wits are but crystallization of wisdom of the common people.

**Ban Zhao (c.49-c.120)**

She is the first known Chinese woman historian who lived during the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 AD). Ban Zhao, also known as Ban Ji or Ban Huiban, was born in Fufeng (in present-day Shaanxi Province) during the reign of Emperor Guangwu. Her father, Ban Biao, was the magistrate of Wangdu County (in present-day Hebei Province). Her brother, Ban Gu was a celebrated scholar. Ban Biao was aware that Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Historical Memoirs) said nothing about the events following the years 104-101 BC during the reign of Emperor Wu Di of the Western Han dynasty. He resolved to fill the gap himself, entitling his work *Shiji Houzhuan* (Sequel to the Historical Memoirs). But he left his work unfinished when he died in 54 AD. His son Ban Gu took up the task of completing the work. Dissatisfied with "The Sequel", he developed it into *Hanshu* (The History of the Han Dynasty). But when he too died in 92 AD, Emperor He Di issued an order asking Ban Zhao to come to Luoyang, the capital, to complete the eight tables of chronological events and a chapter on astronomy--the manuscripts of which had been left scattered by Ban Gu.

Ban Zhao was permitted to work in the Dongguan Imperial Library with full access to its books and archives. Her arrangement of the tables reveals her sound logic,

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1. According to *Cihai* (Chinese Encyclopaedia). Reduced format. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicography Press, 1979, p.47, the library built inside the palace during the Han dynasty was known as Dongguan.
intelligence and high level of scholastic attainment. The chapter on astronomy was written by Ma Xu.² Hanshu was actually written by four people over a period of 30 to 40 years, and was carefully checked, edited, polished and finalized by Ban Zhao.

The language of Hanshu was hard for the average person. Ban Zhao used to give lectures on it in the Dongguan Library. Later she was appointed tutor of the empress and palace ladies who addressed her as "Cao Dagu", an honorific title reserved for well-read and talented women. Ban Zhao was not only a historian, she was knowledgeable in astronomy and mathematics as well.

Born to a family belonging to the ruling class, Ban Zhao had an unswerving allegiance to feudal rites, which, she maintained, should never be transgressed. In her later years, she wrote Nüjie (Admonitions for Women) consisting of seven chapters which later served as an arbiter of conduct binding women to a strict code of feudal rites and ethics.³

Qiao Gu (Clever Girl)

There is a folk tale about Qiao Gu which is very popular in the Hunan Province of China. In brief the story goes that once upon a time there lived an intelligent old man named Zhang Gulao. He had four sons. Three of them were already married. Only the youngest son was still a bachelor. None of his sons were intelligent like him. His three daughters-in-law too were not clever. Zhang Gulao wished to find a girl as his fourth daughter-in-law who would be ingenious and able to manage the household.

One day, he sent his three daughters-in-law back home. But before they went, Zhang told the first one to return after three into five days, the second one after seven plus

2. Ban Zhao was entrusted with the responsibility of compiling the chapter on astronomy jointly with Ma Xu—a person hailing from her native place.

3. Liu Naihe, 'China’s First Woman Historian', in Women of China (in English), Beijing, April 1980, pp.40-41. Also see Cihai, n.1, p.1210.
eight days, and the third one after fifteen days. They were asked to return on the same
day. He also asked them to bring some presents for him: the first one—a red-cored radish,
the second one—a fire-packed paper, and the third one—a legless soft-shelled turtle. After
the three had reached the crossroads, it suddenly occurred to them that their father-in-law
had asked them something which they did not understand. So they wept bitterly. The
daughter of Wang, a butcher living near the crossroads, went out to have a look. She
quickly solved the riddles: the red-cored radish was an egg, the fire-packed paper was a
paper-lantern, and the legless soft-shelled turtle was beancurd. When three of them
returned after fifteen days with their presents, Zhang was astonished. Soon he came to
know the reality, and ultimately managed to get the butcher’s daughter Qiao Gu as his
fourth daughter-in-law. After testing her intelligence at different occasions, Zhang finally
asked Qiao Gu to manage the household.

Once Zhang wrote on his door - "We rely upon none for anything." Unfortunately
a prefectural magistrate, who was passing by his doorstep, became enraged at this. He
ordered Zhang to find out three things in three days’ time: one, a pregnant bull; two,
vegetable oil just the amount of sea-water; and three, a piece of black cloth to cover the
sky. Zhang racked his brains for a solution, but in vain. When the magistrate came after
three days, Qiao Gu calmly said that Zhang had gone to give birth to a child. The
magistrate said that childbirth is a matter only of women. Qiao Gu retorted, saying that
when he knew of this fact then how could he ask Zhang to find such an impossible thing.
Next, Qiao Gu asked the magistrate to dry up the sea-water. The latter said it was
impossible because the water was boundless. Qiao Gu replied then in that case, the oil
cannot be poured in the place of sea. Lastly, Qiao Gu asked the magistrate to tell her the
width of the sky. And here too the latter answered that none had ever measured it. Qiao
Gu said in such an event where the sky’s width is unknown, then how can the cloth be
bought to do the job. The magistrate filed in his sedan-chair after much embarrassment.
Zhang Gulao was already well-known. Now Qiao Gu too gained popularity due to her intelligent answers and clever retorts.4

Xiu Niang (Lady Embroidery)

In the foothills of Langshan came one day an old man, who had escaped the horrors of war, along with his daughter of eighteen or nineteen. She was very beautiful and extremely skillful in embroidery. Soon the village people near the River Yangzi came to know of her expertise. Her embroidered fish used to swim in the water, birds used to fly in the sky, flowers used to give forth sweet fragrance, melons used to turn ripe, and the embroidered men and women used to startle the living ones by their facial expression and smiles. Far and near she came to be known as Xiu Niang—"the lady expert in embroidery."

There was an old local tyrant who used to rule over twenty-four towns, thirty-six hamlets, and the surrounding stretches of fields full of crops. This ugly old man had dirty yellow teeth and a goatee. One day he took a bunch of thugs and barged into Xiu Niang's house and ordered her to make his portrait true to life by embroidery. Next day the tyrant went and saw that his face had been embroidered, but without hair and without beard. The tyrant felt dissatisfied and ordered Xiu Niang to embroider his wealth. Xiu Niang embroidered a sunny day, fields full of golden wheat, an enormous heap of wheat grains, and on top of the heap stood a sturdy young peasant with a smile reflecting the joy of harvest; the peasant was pouring wheat from his basket, and the grains were flowing down like a cascade. The tyrant wanted to see his own portrait along with his wealth. On the other side of that cloth he saw only a man's head with white hair and pale face sinking in the sea of wheat; his facial expression seemed as if he were going to die soon. He got furious and kicked the embroidery-stand down. Then he ordered Xiu Niang to embroider

his love. As soon as the tyrant went off, Xiu Niang invited other women from the village, and in one night they embroidered his love. Next morning the tyrant and all his thugs were ushered into a big room where they got almost blinded by glittering rays. They saw a big luxurious palace and high pavilions with dancing palace beauties. They were transfixed more when they saw a big treasure house full of rare stones and jewels. At this moment, when they were all lost in such magnificence, Xiu Niang pushed them in and bolted the door quickly. Then she tightly sewed the door of the treasure house with thick threads. Thus those evil creatures were wiped out from the face of the earth.

From then on the poor people started sending their daughters to Xiu Niang to learn embroidery. The eighteen methods of skillful embroidery, it is said, was invented by Xiu Niang. 5

Hudie Liu (Butterfly Liu)

In the eastern suburbs of Changsha of the Hunan Province, there is a legend about a peasant girl named Liu Min Gu. It is said that she was good at embroidering butterflies. Her colourful butterflies were so attractive that many people used to come to her.

Once a rich man wanted to celebrate his sixtieth birthday by having a hundred butterflies embroidered on his blackish green quilt cover. Liu Min Gu spent 360 days, 49 jin of kerosene and 81-count silken threads to finish the job. The rich old man and his wife were amazed to see Liu Min Gu's exclusive butterflies. Then both of them began counting the butterflies, and found that one was missing. It was ninety-nine instead of hundred. The rich man was annoyed at this. Then Liu herself counted it up and down, and found it 99. She started looking around in the room. Then suddenly a maid servant found one butterfly on a peony in a flower-pot. The rich man angrily said that it was one that flew from outside, and that an embroidered one can never become alive. But Liu caught it and put it on the quilt cover. Immediately it got fixed on the cover, never to

5. Cao Ge (Coll.), 'Xiu Niang' (Lady Embroidery), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.208-212.
move again. After several rounds of counting, all were convinced that it was hundred.
And all praised that Liu Min Gu can embroider butterflies to life.

She became famous and embroidered lots of butterflies for many years. But later due to her old age, her eyes became weak, muscles became loose. She could no longer differentiate colours, nor thread a needle. She only used to cut shoe patterns with butterfly designs and sell them. Young mothers would like to see their children put on shoes with such exclusive designs. They were all true to life. The womenfolk in towns and countryside gave her a name, affectionately calling her—"Hudie Liu".6

Cha Gu (Tea Girl)

There is a folktale popular among the people of the Dabie Hills, situated at the border region of Henan, Hubei and Anhui provinces of China. The story goes that once there lived a rich man whose family name was Wen. At the time of collecting taxes he used to call the land-tillers, the harvesters, the long-term hired hands and maidservants under his control, to the top of Dabie Hills. He sat on one peak and the others stood on another. He put a line to them, this was to be completed by a second line, thus composing an antithetical couplet. Wen placed a condition that if anyone could rightly couple it, he would not collect any tax that year. Otherwise they all would have to pay double the tax stipulated for that year. Year after year the poor people went through untold sufferings under Wen’s policy of deception:

Once Wen forced the people to ascend the "coupling terrace" of Dabie Hills. This time, he threw a couplet saying: "The falling snows look like a shower of rain, reaching the ground they turn into water. Two things are done at a go. It would have been better if God had simply made rain." Saying so, he started chewing some deep-fried dough cakes with great pleasure. Suddenly from the crowd came out a girl named Cha Gu. Not long

6. Zhao Haizhou (Coll.), 'Hudie Liu' (Butterfly Liu), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.213-216. Jin is a Chinese unit of weight equal to 1/6 kilogram.
ago her husband had died while building stone houses for Wen. But the latter did not even make a coffin for him. Cha Gu completed the couplet: "The deep-fried dough cake looks like a piece of oil-paper, when eaten it reaches the stomach and turns into faeces. Two things are done at a go. It would have been better if you, my lord, had simply consumed faeces." A big laughter broke out everywhere, only the guests of Wen were annoyed. Not admitting his defeat, Wen threw another line of couplet: "A child beat the tung oilseeds, when the seeds fell the child smiled." Cha Gu immediately coupled it: "A girl climbed the fork of a tree, when the fork bent down the girl became mischievous." Even after this, Wen was reluctant to admit his defeat. Now he asked Cha Gu to put the first line. Cha Gu threw some riddles: "In this world what is the thinnest object? What is the deepest? What is the most painful? What is the most poisonous?" Wen replied that lamp was the thinnest, sea was the deepest, the rhizome of Chinese goldthread was the most painful thing to eat, snakes and scorpions were the most poisonous on earth. Cha Gu yelled at Wen, "It's all wrong! The eyelid is the thinnest, intentions are the deepest, the poor people's condition is the most painful, and you--the landlord is the most poisonous". The people loudly applauded and tore the account book to pieces. Wen was so badly scared that he paid double wages to all the people under him, and ceased to hold couplet-meets anymore. The people changed the name "coupling terrace" into "Cha Gu Tai" (Tea Girl Terrace) in order to commemorate Cha Gu and her intelligence and courage. 7

Mother of Lu Ban

Everyone knows Lu Ban, the master carpenter and his excellent skill. But perhaps very few know about his mother and her skill at doing things. There is a story, popular in Zhenjiang of the Jiangsu Province, which tells us that originally Lu Ban's saw blade was plain. It did not have teeth. It took a long time to cut wood. The cutter usually felt tired after some time. One morning as Lu Ban was sawing wood, his mother saw his utterly

7. Li Hao (Coll.), 'Cha Gu Tai' (Tea Girl Terrace), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.143-146. The rhizome of Chinese gold-thread or huanglian is a Chinese medicinal herb. Its scientific name is Coptis chinensis.
fatigued appearance--sweating and sighing; and felt sorry for him. She was combing her hair with a wooden comb. As she carelessly moved the comb through her hair, the comb teeth caused pain to her scalp. She immediately asked Lu Ban to give the saw to her. Then with a vegetable chopper she made several grooves on the saw blade--just like the comb teeth. Lu Ban reacted, saying that the saw now looked ugly. His mother said it did not matter whether it was ugly, and urged him to use it. Without much effort Lu Ban could cut logs to pieces. For cutting big trees, Lu Ban's mother asked him to make big bladed saws so that those could be used by two persons. Lu Ban and his pupils all appreciated her opinion.

In Zhenjiang, there is another story about Lu Ban's mother though the following invention is often attributed to his sister in the tales of Hangzhou. It is said that long ago people felt it very much inconvenient to go outdoors. Either they got badly tanned by the scorching sun or they got drenched in the heavy rain. Lu Ban's mother asked her son to find out a solution to this problem. After some time, Lu Ban and his pupils made ten wayside pavilions and asked the old lady to have a look. She looked at them and remarked that people would never like to spend all their time under pavilions. She watched the structure of the pavilions carefully and went back. With bamboo sticks she made a frame just like a little pavilion and pasted some oil-paper on the top. The frame was flexible. It could be opened and folded at will. This object was named umbrella. Lu Ban was amazed to see this 'moving pavilion'. From then on people have been using it. 8

Mother of Mencius

Mengzi or Mencius (c.372-289BC), an outstanding thinker of the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), inherited and developed the Confucian school of thought and became the highest authority of the Confucian school. His influence remained strong throughout the 2000 years of feudalism, with feudal rulers worshipping him as "Second to

8. Zhou Zhongliang (Coll.), 'Lu Ban Shi Niang de Gushi' (The Stories of the Mother of Lu Ban), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.201-203.
the Sage”. His becoming a famous Confucianist certainly had much to do with his childhood education, most of which he received from his mother, Zhang.

The best known story is of how Zhang moved the family three times to find the best environment for her son to study in. She believed that the environment in which a child lived was not to be overlooked. Children, not fully developed physically or mentally, insatiably curious and eager to imitate what they see around them, are greatly influenced by, and vulnerable to, their environment. With the saying “He who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and he who stays near ink gets stained black,” in mind, Zhang was extremely careful as to what neighbourhood would be best for Mencius to study in. The family first used to live near a graveyard. When Zhang noticed her son imitating the undertakers, digging with his little spade, she knew that living in the vicinity of a graveyard had adversely influenced her son and his studies. Later she shifted her family to a place close to a market. Soon Mencius became interested in the bustling crowds and the lively, raucous vendors. Zhang again moved her family. This time they found a house next to an educational institution. Mencius finally began to concentrate on his study and behave respectfully under the positive influence of the scholars and students there. Seeing this, Zhang settled there happily.

Mencius’ mother taught her son the necessity of diligent study. As a child, Mencius was not attentive enough at school, which worried Zhang. Once on asking him about his study, Mencius replied indifferently. Extremely disappointed, Zhang tore the threads on the loom, and said that to neglect one’s studies is just like breaking off the shuttle. Mencius took her words to heart and became modest and eager to learn. With his mother’s careful guidance and expounding on virtue and morality, Mencius was well prepared to embrace Confucianism and made up his mind to devote his life to publicizing the thoughts of the Confucian school.9

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Mother of Xu Xiake

Xu Hongzu, also known as Xiake (1586-1641), was a native of Jiangyin (in the present-day Jiangsu Province) and an outstanding geologist of the late Ming dynasty. Xu Xiake, who was born into a distinguished scholar's family, departed from convention--showing no interest in becoming an official through imperial examinations.

Some progressive intellectuals, including Xu, began to promote science and to advocate putting theory into practice--at a time when trade was developing rapidly in the coastal provinces in southeast China along with the growth of mercantile capitalism.

Xu spent more than 30 years travelling around the country far and wide. The detailed observation that he made on the sources of rivers, mountains, topography, and flora and fauna at different places, remain quite accurate till today. His studies on igneous rocks, terrestrial heat, the corrosive influence of water on rocks and the dependence of plants on weather were sophisticated for its time.

Apart from his own efforts and the influence of new ideas at the time, Xu Xiake owed much of his success to his mother’s teachings and encouragement. His mother, whose maiden name was Wang, was a highly skilled weaver and made her living by it. Jiangyin was then an important river port handling domestic and foreign trade. The coastal areas were influenced by budding capitalism. Swayed by the new school of thought at the time, Wang ardently supported her son’s ambitious work. Wholeheartedly she encouraged him to devote himself to the study of geography. She helped Xu dispel the superstitious beliefs in witchcraft and spirits. Wang made a light travel kit for her son, and inspired confidence in him. When Xu’s wife died, Wang took care of the house and her grandson so that Xu Xiake could devote himself to the study of geography.

People thought that Wang was an uncommon woman because she supported her son’s choice of a career which was not profitable and would not lead to high offices either. Many of them felt amazed to see how the mother and her son complemented each other in
their extraordinary relationship.10

2. Women of Patriotism, Courage and Self-Sacrifice

Here we would also include women of heroism and women with sense of justice; women of brawn, bravery and resourcefulness, etc. First, we would examine the purely legendary figures and quasi-historical characters, then the historical personages. Under this category we would find such women who matched the courage and selflessness of men, or even surpassed them at times. But their loyalty and sincerity were unparalleled.

Huashan (Flower Coral)

Once upon a time Mount Wuyishan on the southeastern coast of the Chinese mainland was one with Mount Alishan of Taiwan. Those days the hill-tops and the foothills were all full with flowers and fruits. Mountain streams and springs made the land fertile. The people used to live happily with smiles and songs.

But then came a demon who occupied the entire hilly region. None knew how it looked like. But its arrival brought disaster to everything on the hills. The fountains and streams dried up, the tree-leaves and flowers all withered, and the fertile land became desolate. Some brave young men went to the hills to kill the demon because it had caused violent tempests and killed many innocent people. But none of these brave men came back. Many villagers left the place with their families.

At the western foot of the mountain there lived a woman named Huaxia with her daughter Huashan. Huashan was exceptionally beautiful, intelligent and courageous. When she saw that the people could no longer bear the harms inflicted by the demon, she resolved to exterminate the menace. Huashan acquired some extraordinary skill after eighty-one days of sincere practice of martial arts. She became perfect in archery and

10. Lai Shuncheng, 'Ancient Geologist Xu Xiake and his Mother', in Women of China (in English), Beijing, September 1982, pp.41-42.
One day, when black clouds engulfed the stars and the moon, Huashan crept out of her abode and went to the hill-top, clasping her bow and arrows. Suddenly she discovered two green balls of light approaching her in the darkness from the side of the peak. A black wall-like structure moved slowly behind the glowing lights. She was sure that this was the demon. The green lights were its eyes. Huashan struck the eyes with her swift arrows and blinded the demon. Then she pounced upon it and with severe blows chopped off its head with her broadsword. As the demon fell dead, the mountain broke asunder. And the water of the eastern sea gushed into gorge. Huashan had already leapt to the eastern side of the cracking mountain. Unfortunately, her mother remained on the western half. Thus they were separated forever.

The flowers blossomed once more, the fountains and streams started flowing once again, and the people returned home with renewed hope. Only Huaxia kept on calling her daughter, standing on the peak of Wuyishan. The roaring sea waves were her cries. Huaxia gradually turned into a big rock. Huashan, standing on the top of Alishan, could no more see her mother. The vast expanse of water cut her vision. Gradually she turned into a red juniper tree, expanding her branches up into the sky. 11

Baisha Guniang (White Yarn Girl)

By the end of the Tang dynasty, during the Huangchao Peasant Uprising, there lived a girl by the banks of the River Xin'an at Jiande. She was a young girl who had become an orphan at her childhood. She made a living by spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Since the yarn spun by her was well-distributed, exquisite and tenacious, the cloth woven was smooth and tough. The local people used to call her Baisha Guniang. She felt elated to see people putting on clothes woven by her. And from this she got inspiration to

11. Shi Yufa (Coll.), 'Wuyishan he Alishan de Chuanshuo' (The Legend of Mount Wuyishan and Mount Alishan) in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.233-237.
weave more clothes. Once she bought some cotton and wove a long piece of cloth--white and tough.

One day when she was washing the white cloth in the river water, suddenly she could hear an uproar on the other bank of the river. There a cloud of dust rose and some ten and odd men on horseback were to be seen rushing towards the river. The surging waves impeded the horsemen to ford across the stretch of water. Finally Baisha Guniang came to know that it was the army of Huang Chao who had been fighting for the poor. Actually Huang Chao had been ambushed by the official army. He could break through the encirclement only after a long battle. The enemies were after him. But the water was deep. Initially Baisha Guniang was bewildered about how to help Huang Chao cross the river. In utter helplessness she threw the white cloth towards the river. Surprisingly, the cloth flew to the other bank of the river, and a white stone bridge was created. Huang Chao and his men crossed the river. Huang Chao paid his gratitude to her and rode off. The enemy soldiers could not cross the river quickly because the bridge had already turned into its original form. On some quickly-made bamboo rafts the enemies forded the water and caught Baisha Guniang. They threatened her. But she was unwilling to help them. The soldiers snatched the cloth and threw it into the river. It gradually sank instead of changing into a bridge. Baisha Guniang, who had yearned to live a happy life, was beheaded ruthlessly on the river bank.

Next day, Huang Chao led a huge army and broke the backbone of the enemy troops, thus retrieving both the banks of the Xin'an River. When he came to know that Baisha Guniang had died to save him, he was filled with sorrow and tears. On the river bank he built a tomb and himself he wrote the characters on the tombstone: "The Tomb of the White Yarn Fairy Girl." The bridge which was later erected across the Xin'an River reminds people of the jade-like white yarn of the bygone days.12

Baihua Gongzhu (Hundred-Flower Princess) or Fang Baihua

Once a Song emperor had ordered to select beautiful girls for his palace from every nook and corner of the land.

There lived a girl in a mountain hamlet. She was extremely beautiful—just like a blooming camellia. From her childhood she used to wander in the wilderness with her father, with a heavy bow on her shoulder. She became an expert in martial arts, and possessed enormous strength. Once she hunted a leopard and went to the town to sell it.

As the girl was about to enter the town, she was taken aback after seeing ninety-nine girls in a row with their hands tied. An official in his large attire was seated on a horse, and he had a few soldiers at his disposal. As he came out of the walled city, he noticed the girl and felt elated that she would certainly make it hundred. But before the soldiers could catch her, she dealt them a few kicks and blows, letting them scurry like mice. She pulled the official down from his horse and smashed his head.

The girl rescued ninety-nine girls but got into immense trouble. She quickly took them to the camp of Fang La who was then preparing to stage a rebellion. Fang La accepted them. The brave girl was named Baihua (Hundred Flowers) before she began training the girls in martial arts. Later she formed an army unit of women and joined the ranks of Fang La. Soon afterwards, Fang La led an army and raided Hangzhou. Back in the base camp, Baihua organized a troop of several thousands of women.

Fang La fought at Hangzhou for several weeks but could not capture the city. This almost drove him to despair. Just then Baihua led her women-army to Hangzhou to bolster Fang La's morale. Baihua and Fang La discussed their future strategy and tactics, and came to a conclusion.

For ten days Fang La remained silent. The officials in the walled city sent people to collect firewood and gather information regarding Fang La. Some went back and said that the Jade Emperor had sent the Hundred-Flower Princess to help Fang La conquer the
land. Some said that she could invoke storm, and that she led a million-strong army of heavenly soldiers and generals. These words spread like a prairie fire. The government soldiers began trembling with fear.

One night all of a sudden thousands of torches lit up in the army camp of Fang La. It was as if a celestial army had descended on earth. Baihua gave her army a mystic look. Before their foreheads the girls hung small mirrors. With the sound of crackers, the women army started beating war drums. Wielding her long spear, Baihua rode straight to the Hangzhou city gate, followed by her grand army. The torchlight and the reflection of light on the mirrors lit half the sky in that moonless night. Baihua and her army fought the battle full of valour and vigour. the next day Fang La and his insurrectionary army succeeded in conquering Hangzhou. Since then the name Hundred-Flower Princess became known to all—far and near.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Mulan} (lit. Magnolia):

During the Han dynasty, the emperors were at war with the Huns. The Huns used to launch surprise attack at the border. The court was virtually compelled to send a massive troop to guard the border posts. There was one General Wei who had distinguished himself in action. After the death of Emperor Liu Bang, the empress Lü Zhi proved herself to be wicked and merciless in all her stately dealings. She persecuted many faithful officials of Liu Bang. Wei, after seeing all these, left the court and went back to the countryside.

Wei had a son and a daughter. Surprisingly, their appearance were just the

\textsuperscript{13} Xu Fei (Coll.), 'Baihua Gongzhu' (Hundred-Flower Princess), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.256-260. 'Fang Baihua Dianjiang' (Fang Baihua Selected General of the Army), in Research Section for Teaching Chinese to Foreigners, Beijing Normal University (Comp.), Zhongguo Minjian Gushi (Folktales of China). Beijing, 1984, pp.114-118. Fang La (d.1121) led a peasant uprising in 1120. Later he was defeated by the army of Song emperor Huizong.
opposite. The daughter, named Mulan, with a tall stature and dark complexion, looked more like a male. In order to make her look like a female, her mother tied her up on a cot with her feet bound tightly. With small feet, Mulan’s movements became highly restricted. She could not learn embroidery though she was forced to do so. On the contrary, she stealthily learnt the martial arts practised by her father in the courtyard.

During the reign of the Han emperor Wendi, the Huns once more invaded the borders. Many generals sent by the emperor were defeated, and their troops were totally routed. Suddenly someone recalled General Wei of the yesteryears. But by that time Wei had already grown old. Even after repeated orders from the court, he refused to comply. When the emperor was going to consider this as disobedience from the part of Wei, and Wei was mentally preparing himself to go to the battlefield in spite of his senility, at this crucial juncture Mulan decided to join the army on behalf of her father. Before the emperor she introduced herself as Mudi, the son of General Wei. The emperor made her one of his generals. She made her presence felt by inflicting crushing defeat on the enemy. Mulan used to sleep with her armour, clothes and shoes on in order to conceal her feminine identity. The commander-in-chief appreciated this as combat readiness and ordered all the soldiers to follow Mulan.

Throughout the twelve long years of battle none could discover Mulan’s feminine identity. The Huns were ultimately vanquished. The soldiers were tired. Mulan ordered them to encamp by the banks of the Lotus Pool. She took her horse to the pool to quench its thirst. As she stepped onto the banks, both her feet got bogged down into the sludge. She forcefully pulled her legs out whereupon her shoes remained inside the mud, leaving her little feet exposed for all to see. All the soldiers under Mulan’s command flocked by her side to witness in great wonder that their general was a woman. Within a few moments she was standing in a sea of people, everyone gazing at her. She could find no place to hide herself for shame. Out of a terrible shock Mulan fell dead in front of all.

After the commander-in-chief had learnt about the incident, he sent a message to the emperor. Wendi was extremely moved. He conferred her with the title--Xiaolie
Jiangjun' (General with Filial Piety and Sacrificing Spirit). A temple was constructed by the banks of the Lotus Pool in her honour.\textsuperscript{14}

**Liu Hulan (1932-1947):**

Liu Hulan became a legendary figure during the War of Liberation (1945-1949) in China. She hailed from the province of Shanxi in north China. In 1946, in the western Yunzhou Village of the Wenshui County, she became active in land reform movement and in supporting the Communist Party's frontline activities. The same year she was admitted to the Party. On the 12th of January 1947, the troops of the Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan launched a surprise attack over the village and arrested her. In the face of threatening, Liu Hulan unyieldingly proclaimed, "As long as there is a breath left in me, I will work for the people till the end." The soldiers of Yan's army had no other means to extort the names of the Party activists from her. They chopped off the heads of six peasants of that village with a hay-cutter as a warning to Liu Hulan. But Liu Hulan was not frightened at the least. She laid down her head under the blade of the chopper on her own accord, and sacrificed her life. The Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, Mao Zedong wrote the following few words in her commemoration: "Sheng de weida, si de guangrong" (A great life and a glorious death).\textsuperscript{15}

3. **Sincere Love and Feudal Domination**

Since time immemorial there have been innumerable instances where lovers have united in profound love and sincere attachment irrespective of barriers created by social status, economic background or feudal norms. On the other hand there have been untold misery of women caused by the rulers: both worldly and celestial, the monks with

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dubious character, the status-conscious parents, the in-laws, or even women with dissatisfaction and jealousy. In spite of oppression, it has been depicted time and again that love triumphs over various onslaughts. Even in tragedy, the chastity of women is preserved. In China, in most of the cases, such tales never end in reunion of lovers. Their yearning and parting forever mark the peculiarity of the Chinese folktales.

**Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai:**

Once upon a time there was a girl name Zhu Yingta. She was not only beautiful and intelligent, but also knew embroidery, reading and writing. At 17 she felt too eager to seek education at a boarding-school. But those days women were not allowed to do so. So she disguised herself as a young man and went to Hangzhou for higher studies.

On her way to Hangzhou, Zhu Yingta met a young man named Liang Shanbo. He was 18 and he too was going to Hangzhou. Soon they became good friends. They studied and even lived in the same room together for three years. Liang Shanbo did not know at all that his roommate was a girl.

Once Zhu Yingta received a letter from her father urging her to return home immediately. Liang Shanbo felt very sad to part with his friend. He went out to see her off. They chatted while walking along the road. Zhu suddenly turned her head and told Liang that the gander was gladly following the goose. Liang nodded his head without understanding the actual meaning of Zhu. After some time, two wild geese were seen flying in the sky. Zhu pointed at them and remarked that one came from the east, the other from the west, but she would like to wish them a happy conjugal life. Liang could not get the inner meaning of her words.

After a while, they reached a roadside well. They went to the well and peeped in. Pointing at their reflection in the water, Zhu said that they looked like a married couple. Liang displeasingly inquired why Zhu was comparing him with a girl. Zhu only smiled at him.
At the end Zhu knew that there was no other way to convey her meaning to Liang. So she told Liang that she had a younger sister and that Liang should hurry to propose if he wished so. Liang gladly agree to this.

The father of Zhu Yingtai pressed her to marry the son of an official. But she firmly denied, saying that she waited for Liang Shanbo. Her father got annoyed after knowing that Liang was a poor scholar with whom she wanted to tie the knots. At the other end, Liang could no longer sleep or eat after seeing Zhu off. One day one of his acquaintances informed him that Zhu was a girl and that she was longing for him. Happily Liang went to Zhu’s house to ask for her hand. But Zhu expressed her inability to marry him in the face of her parents’ opposition. Liang was dumbfounded to hear this. After suffering from a serious illness he passed away.

Zhu Yingtai’s father then asked her to give her consent. She simply put a condition to her marriage, and her father had to comply with her wish. On the wedding day the palanquin stopped before the grave of Liang Shanbo. Zhu Yingtai got down from the palanquin and kneeling before the grave she started crying bitterly. Suddenly the sky turned dark, the gale blew hard, and a torrential rain poured down with thunder and lightning. Suddenly with a big cracking sound the grave of Liang Shanbo split open. It seemed to Zhu as if Liang were lying inside. She at once jumped into it and the grave resumed its original integral form.

The wind stopped blowing, the raindrops stopped falling, the clouds dispersed, and the day turned sunny again. Fragrant flowers blossomed on the grave. And a pair of beautiful butterflies were seen dancing freely amidst the flowering shrubs.16

Niulang (The Cowherd) and Zhinü (the Girl Weaver):

Long ago there was a child whose parents had died early. He lived with his elder brother and sister-in-law. They treated him very badly: in daytime he had to graze cow

and in the night he was asked to sleep in the cowshed. He had no name. People used to call him Niulang. After he grew up into an adult, his brother gave him the cow and a broken cart, and asked him to leave that place.

Niulang settled at a picturesque place with mountains and streams around. Later he built a small hut and started tilling a piece of land. One evening his cow told him that the next day, the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the southern gate of heaven will open. The granddaughter of the Royal Mother of Paradise would descend before the mountain to take a bath in the lake... The next day at dusk Niulang went to the lakeside and saw some fairies taking bath in the lake. As the cow had advised, he picked up the pink-coloured garment and hid himself behind the trees.

After a while a guard came out of the southern gate of heaven and called the fairies back. Only the seventh fairy could not go back because she failed to find out her garment. Niulang then gave her clothes back. Both of them came to know about the other's unhappiness. This seventh fairy, the granddaughter of the Royal Mother of Paradise, could weave bright and beautiful clouds and decorate the firmament. People used to call her Zhini. But her maternal grandmother, the Royal Mother of Paradise, made her work day and night without a moment of rest, and gave her no freedom. Ultimately both Niulang and Zhini decided to become life partners. They lived together in the hut. One tilled the land, the other wove garments. They passed three years happily. They had a son and a daughter.

One day the old cow with tears in her eyes told Niulang that she was going to die soon and that he should preserve her skin for it may come to his use in emergency. It so happened that the Royal Mother of Paradise came to know that her granddaughter was living happily with Niulang on earth. One day when Niulang was out in the fields, she came down from heaven and dragged Zhini out from the hut. The two children of Zhini who had come to their mother's rescue, were pushed to the ground by the Royal Mother. Then she started flying up into the sky with Zhini. Niulang came running on hearing his children's cries. He put them into two big baskets. As soon as he draped the cow's hide
over his shoulder, he started soaring into the sky. But as he went closer to Zhinü, the Royal Mother drew a line behind her with her jade hairpin. And there appeared the surging white waves of the Milky Way. Niulang could no longer cross the Heavenly River.

Niulang and Zhinü were separated for ever. Every year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, thousands of magpies build a bridge over the Heavenly River to let them meet each other.\(^17\)

Bai Niangzi (The White Lady)

There was a white snake which had practised Buddhism for a thousand years and changed into a beautiful girl in a white robe. One year during the Pure Brightness Festival, the White Lady was strolling by a lake when she noticed a snakecatcher holding a green snake in his hand. She bought it and set it free. Suddenly it turned into a little girl in a green robe. The White Lady and the Tiny Green became sworn sisters. On that very day, they came to know a young man called Xu Xian while on a boating trip over the West Lake. The White Lady and Xu Xian fell in love at first sight. Soon they got married and opened a pharmacy named 'Baohetang' (Hall for Maintaining Harmony) at Zhenjiang along with the Tiny Green. The White Lady and Xu Xian passed their days in deep conjugal love. At the entrance of their pharmacy they hung a board with the inscription: "Free Medicine for the Poor". At this time the people of Zhenjiang were suffering from an epidemic disease. The poor came even from far off places to take medicine from Baohetang. People were in all praise for the pharmacy.

This offended the monk Fahai of the Jinshan (Golden Mountain) Temple. Initially when people got ill they used to go to Fahai. He used to draw magic figures, chant incantations and give his patients panacean pills. The patients had to always pay money or offer gifts. Now they found a place of charitable treatment at Baohetang. Ultimately

\(^{17}\) Zhongguo Minjian Gushi, n.13, pp.84-90.
Fahai chalked out a vicious plan. One day when the White Lady was in the hills, he managed to inform Xu Xian that his wife was a snake. The next day it was the Dragon Boat Festival. The custom goes that people take yellow wine to ward off snakes. The White Lady sent the Tiny Green to hide in the hills because consuming of wine could bring back the original form of a snake. In order to test the words of Fahai, Xu Xian pressed his wife to take wine. After taking a few sips the White Lady felt giddy and went to lie down upon her bed. Xu Xian followed her and found a white snake sleeping on the bed. With a scream Xu Xian fell dead on the floor. The Tiny Green came in the afternoon and after realizing the situation woke up the White Lady. The latter rode the white clouds and reached the Kunlun Mountains. On the top of it she found the life-giving glossy ganoderma. She plucked it and as she was about to leave, a red-crowned crane launched a surprise attack. Soon the Longevity God came out, and after listening to the White Lady's words he allowed her to take the magic herb. The White Lady came back home after a week, and after decocting the herb brought Xu Xian back to life. But Fahai seized another chance and locked Xu Xian up in the Jinshan Temple.

The two sisters went to save Xu Xian. Fahai was terribly rude to them. Since the White Lady was pregnant and weak, she called the dragons to help her. Half of the temple got drowned. Then Fahai waved one outer vestment which acted as a dyke to resist the waves. Originally Fahai had stolen this vestment, a walking stick and a begging bowl from Tathagata Buddha. The White Lady having realized that it would be an unequal battle, hid herself in the bottom of the lake. Xu Xian, after some time, escaped from the temple and finally met his wife to lead a happy life again. They got a child. On the day of the child's completion of one month, a peddler came selling "golden phoenix caps". Xu Xian bought one. As soon as the White Lady put it on her head the cap became increasingly tight until she fainted. At this moment Fahai entered Xu Xian's house and turned the cap into a begging bowl. Actually the peddler was none other than Fahai. Fahai reduced the White Lady into a little snake to contain inside the bowl. Then he built Lei Feng Ta (Thunder Peak Pagoda) on top of the bowl, thereby imprisoning the
White Lady under it.

The Tiny Green went into the deep mountains and practised martial arts for several years. Then she came back to the pagoda and met Fahai. They fought a pitched battle for three days and three nights. The sound of their weapons was so loud that Buddha woke up only to find that his 'triratna' were missing. He found those in the possession of Fahai, and immediately retrieved them. The pagoda collapsed and the bowl flew back to Buddha. The White Lady came out and together with the Tiny Green fought Fahai. Fahai had become powerless without 'triratna'. So he ran to Buddha asking for help. Buddha, with disgust and hatred for such a wicked man, kicked Fahai down into a lake. But the White Lady and her sister chased Fahai closely. He desperately looked for a place to hide. At last he managed to enter the shell of a crab. The crab closed its shell and locked Fahai up for ever.

Originally the crab used to move straight. But ever since Fahai entered its shell, its walks sideways—just like Fahai, playing the tyrant.\(^2\)

**Meng Jiang Nü**

Once upon a time there lived two families: Meng and Jiang. The Mengs sowed a trellis of bottle gourd. The creeper bore fruit in the courtyard of the Jiangs. Both the families cut the gourd, and to their surprise found a beautiful little girl inside. They named her Meng Jiang Nü, or the daughter of Meng and Jiang. She grew into a charming lady.

At that time the Qin emperor was recruiting young men to construct the Great Wall. There was a young man named Fan Xiliang who fled his native place and was

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hiding in the Mengs' garden for fear of being forced to do hard labour. Meng Jiang Nü met him in the garden. They got married soon after. But on the wedding night Fan was caught by the official soldiers and taken to the construction site. Meng Jiang Nü wept bitterly. Then she finally packed up some winter garment for her husband and set off for the Great Wall. On reaching there, she enquired about her husband's whereabouts but in vain. At last someone told her that Fan Xiliang had died due to excessive fatigue. Meng Jiang Nü wailed for three days and three nights. Suddenly with a big thud, a large portion of the Great Wall collapsed. At the base of the wall she found the corpse of Fan Xiliang.

After hearing of the collapse of the wall, the emperor had Meng Jiang Nü arrested. But when he saw her, he forgot to punish her. Instead, he wanted to marry her. Meng Jiang Nü put forth three conditions for marriage: firstly, the corpse of Fan should be buried after calculating geomantic omen; secondly, the emperor must put on the mourning dress along with his ministers and pay homage to Fan; and thirdly, she would remain in the state of mourning forfortynine days after which she would be ready to marry the emperor. In the hope of marrying Meng Jiang Nü the emperor, though with hesitation, finally fulfilled what she had asked for. On the last day of her mourning, Meng Jiang Nü cried bitterly for her dead husband. Then she frowned hard at the emperor, and jumped into the surging waves of the Yellow River. The emperor ordered his men to catch her. But by that time Meng Jiang Nü had already vanished in the roaring waves.¹⁹

**Liu Lanzhi**

Liu Lanzhi was a beautiful, hardworking, virtuous and cultured woman. She married Jiao Zhongqing and they became attached to each other. Most of the time Zhongqing remained busy in his work at the government office. Lanzhi started weaving at dawn and worked at the loom till midnight. She made fine tapestries. But her mother-in-law, who lived with them, maltreated her, complaining that she had no manners and was too lazy even when she wove several hundred feet of cloth in three days. Faced

with her unreasonable mother-in-law, she suffered deep mental distress. Zhongqing tried
to defend his wife but his mother said that she had a pretty maid in her mind for him,
named Qin Luofu. When Zhongqing refused to marry twice, his mother rebuked him
saying that he lacked reverence for parents. Before long the old woman forced her son to
send his wife back to her own home. The son repeatedly begged his mother to change her
mind but she remained adamant. Lanzhi left her dowry and many other things, and finally
bade farewell after modestly telling her mother-in-law that she grieved for being unable to
serve her any more.

Zhongqing and Lanzhi met at the crossroads and vowed to remain loyal to each
other. When Lanzhi reached home, her mother came to know about her tale of agony.
On the tenth day after her return a county magistrate came to woo her for his son. But
Lanzhi firmly refused to marry again. The magistrate's son himself aspired to wed
Lanzhi. So once more they came to ask for her hand. Lanzhi's mother sympathized with
her feelings. But her brother, who wanted to oblige the prefect, spoke harshly to his sister
that she should not seize this opportunity in finding greater profits, and that if she turns
down the offer she should not think that her brother would keep on feeding her daily at
his residence. Finally Lanzhi asked the official to arrange for the wedding ceremony.

The go-between agreed to everything her brother asked for. Gay gondolas
bedecked with silken pennants were arranged to fetch the bride. Strings of cash and pieces
of brocade and silk were presented as dowry. One day Zhongqing rode to his lover's side.
Lanzhi and Zhongqing again expressed their sincerity towards each other, and decided to
terminate their lives. On the eve of the wedding ceremony, Lanzhi jumped into the dark
waters of a cold pond and died. Zhongqing was half-prepared for the news. He then
hung himself with a rope from the trees in his courtyard and ended his life.20

20. Eric Edney & Cao Dun (Tr.), 'The Bride of Jiao
Zhongqing', in Women of China (in English), Beijing,
January 1980, pp.26-30. Hong Yuan, 'An Epic Poem
Indiciting Feudal Ethics', pp.26-27.
4. Filial Piety

In China, filial piety is a popular concept which found its root in the Confucian ethos. Reverence and filial obedience to elders, especially to one's parents, was taught as part of proper human conduct by Confucian scholars through ages. The significance of becoming worthy progeny was inculcated in young people. Filial piety gradually became part and parcel of the social fabric of China. Filial piety came to be regarded as the greatest virtue of a son or a daughter. We find such tales where dutiful sons and daughters, and after marriage kindhearted daughters-in-law have been eulogized. The unfilial ones have been made to regret for their wrongdoings.

The Filial Daughter-in-Law

There was a widow with the family name Zhang. She took good care of her aged father-in-law and looked after his every comfort. In winter when the quilt got cold, she used to warm it before her father-in-law could sleep under it. She did everything in a just and honourable manner. But the village folk censured her for being 'indecent'. She had to endure all mortification for the sake of her old father-in-law.

In that village there used to be a festival of carrying the burning incense to the top of Mount Taishan. Contribution was made every year. People used to ascend the peak and begged the blessings of the Goddess of Taishan in the hope of a peaceful life. It was a year when Zhang had also contributed money for the incense festival. But the village folk disliked her. They thought that it would be disrespectful for such a person like her to offer incense to the Goddess of Taishan. Still they let her travel with them since she had contributed money for the purpose.

When the devotees reached Tai’an, they piously took a bath and took to fast at the foothills. This widow became a persona non grata. She was subjected to humiliation. Next day at dawn the devotees reached the peak and kowtowed. She was the only one who was earnest and sincere. She silently asserted her sincerity to the Goddess.
Then all went up to the Self-Sacrifice Cliff. Since the widow had been suffering from injustice and had received a merciless blow by earning a bad name, she decided to vindicate herself through death. She kowtowed to the Holy Mother of Paradise and jumped into the deep gorge below. The accompanying village folk were struck by this incident. They took the pain to go down into the gorge and put the corpse into a coffin. When the people were busy carrying the coffin into the village, they noticed that the widow was fetching water from a well. All of them were astonished. On asking, the widow said that after jumping from the precipice she waited for death. But she felt that someone had held her, and that she was flying lightly through the air. When she opened her eyes, she found that she had already gone back home. But the people had carried a corpse back. So with mind full of doubt, they opened the coffin only to discover that there laid a pure white stele with the inscription—"A spotless jade and clear ice." The people were stupefied to see this. The filial piety of Zhang, the widow, received appraisal from the Goddess of Taishan.21

The Precious Bowl

Once there lived a woman who maltreated her mother-in-law. She made her mother-in-law do all sorts of laborious job and did not give her enough food. The old woman remained poorly dressed. Her torn and dirty clothes were never mended or washed by her daughter-in-law. She was given an ugly-looking bowl for her food and was also told that she would get no food if the bowl breaks.

Later, the younger lady, the daughter-in-law, herself became a mother-in-law. Her daughter-in-law was very kindhearted, dutiful and intelligent. She did not like the way her mother-in-law treated her grandmother-in-law. One day she secretly advised her grandmother-in-law to feignedly drop the bowl and break it to pieces. The old lady said

that she would starve if the bowl breaks. But the young girl insisted her to do as instructed.

At the time of supper, the old lady dropped the bowl and broke it. Her daughter-in-law rushed out to scold her. But the young girl took the chance to speak first. "Oh! You have turned too old!" she said, "You have broken the precious bowl which could have been handed down through generations. Tell me in which bowl should I give food to my mother-in-law in future?" The old lady's daughter-in-law heard this and thought for a while that she too has a daughter-in-law. If she treats her in this way at her old age, she would hardly be able to endure it. So she changed her attitude overnight and started taking good care of her mother-in-law henceforth. 22

5. Beauties from History

Most of the beautiful ladies, who managed to enter the pages of history, were either imperial concubines or entertainers at the imperial court. Many of them were sent to ensnare kings for political gain. Many were sacrificed to ensure peace in the kingdom. They virtually acted as tools in the hands of monarchs: served one to terminate the other. Yet other tales tell us about their miserable plight, especially when they ceased to be 'useful' any more, or turned into object of jealousy for their extraordinary beauty. However, most of them were quite knowledgeable about statesmanship, diplomacy and espionage. Their patriotic deeds were remembered through ages. Yet there were others who were eulogized for their determination to preserve chastity.

Bao Si

The legend goes back to more than three thousand years. The Zhou king

22. Yan Chun (Coll.), 'Bao Wan' (the Precious Bowl), in Li (Ed.), n.4, pp.177-178.
Youwang\textsuperscript{23} was a tyrant. Ever since the peerless beauty Baosi entered his palace, he indulged in wine and women. His disfavoured queen and concubines were consigned to limbo. After a year, Baosi gave birth to a son. The king became elated. Baosi conspired against the queen and ultimately succeeded in her objective to become the queen herself. Her son Bofu became the crown prince. She arrogated all powers to herself. The king doted on her so much that he started doing exactly what she wanted.

Ever since Baosi entered the palace, she had never smiled even for a moment. The king tried his best but failed to make her laugh. There was a treacherous minister in his court named Guo Shifu. He gave the king a plan to make the queen laugh. The king took the queen to the top of the Lishan Hills\textsuperscript{24}. There, sitting on top of the Lishan Palace, he ordered his men to light up the beacon-fire on the border towers. The dukes, serving the king, came rushing with their army units, thinking it as an alarm against enemy invasion. When they reached the foothills, they could only hear songs and music from the palace. The very sight of dukes and their troops rushing in vain brought laughter to Baosi. At this the king became so happy that he awarded Guo Shifu a thousand taels of gold.

Such an insulting attitude of King Youwang enraged the duke of the State of Shen\textsuperscript{25}. He united the armies of the western region and besieged the capital from three sides. The king asked his men to light up the beacon-fire and raise an alarm. But the dukes, thinking it as another royal joke, did not move their troops.

The king, being too anxious, fled the palace taking Baosi and Bofu with him. On

\textsuperscript{23} King Youwang ruled between 781 BC and 771 BC, and was the last king of the Western Zhou dynasty (1066-771 BC).

\textsuperscript{24} Lishan Hills are situated in the Lintong County of Shaanxi Province in China.

\textsuperscript{25} The State of Shen occupied the area between the two provinces of Shaanxi and Shanxi. After bringing the downfall of the Western Zhou dynasty, Shen extended its support to establish the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 BC) when King Pingwang ascended the throne. Later Shen was vanquished by Qin.
the midway they were caught by the enemy troops. Youwang and Bofu were killed on the spot. But they spared Baosi after seeing her beauty. However, Baosi hung herself to death, anticipating a miserable life ahead. A proverb came down since then: "Land lost in a smile" (Yi xiao shi jiangshan).26

Xishi

In the State of Yue27, there was a beautiful girl like the heavenly angel named Xishi who could surpass the moon goddess Chang E, and the flower queen peony in charm and beauty.

At that time the king of Yue, who had lost a battle and was taken captive by the king of Wu28, managed to return to Yue after extreme humiliation. On his return, he pledged to undergo self-imposed hardships so as to strengthen his resolve to wipe out national humiliation. He was advised by someone to ensnare the king of Wu by means of sending a charming lady to his court as a gift. A senior official of Yue, named Fan Li, was given the duty to choose the most beautiful girl. And he chose Xishi out of several thousand beauties. Under his able guidance, Xishi became expert in playing harp and singing songs, painting and calligraphy, and also playing chess. She was fast to pick up all these within three years. But by that time Fan Li and Xishi were deep in love with each other. Yet they decided to meet again only after the defeat of Wu.

Xishi was presented to the king of Wu. The king fell in love with Xishi to the extent that he gave up looking after the state affairs. He spent days and nights with Xishi. The king lavishly spent money and in five years built a spectacular palace on top of


27. Yue was one of the princely states during the Zhou dynasty. It occupied the entire province of Jiangsu and parts of Zhejiang, Anhui and Shandong.

28. King Fu Cha of Wu ruled between 495 BC and 473 BC.
Xiangshan Hills for Xishi. But Xishi remained calm and quiet without a smile. This prompted the king to spend more in the hope of keeping her smiling all the time.

Xishi used to often gaze towards the direction of Yue and hoped an early conquest of Wu by the king of Yue. Once from the top of a hill she looked towards the Taihu Lake and thought of Yue that lay on the other side of the lake. With her sweet words she made the king open a broad canal linking Taihu to the hills deep inside the territory. She had eighteen wells dug on the way to Mudu, a strategic point. The well-water is cleaner than the river water. But again she put rice chaff into the wells. When the soldiers of Yue will sweat during the battle, they will get loose stomach after taking the cold water of the wells. But now they will have some rest and cooling down of the body while removing the chaff from the water surface. Xishi made the king spend his resources in constructing things which were utterly fruitless. She kept the king away from his experienced minister Wu Zixu by feigning illness, since he was the only one who had understood the motive behind sending Xishi to the kingdom of Wu.

Then came the day when the army of Yue entered Wu. The king was still immersed in wine and merrymaking. It was too late for the king to regret. Before going to the battlefield he said that he would feel ashamed to meet Wu Zixu even in the nether world. By that time Wu Zixu had already died, but his words came true.

Gou Jian, the king of Yue, won the battle. But he was a man who could not side with the affluent. So Fan Li hurried to the palace of Xishi and escaped with her to Wuxi to live in seclusion.

29. The Taihu Lake is located between Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.

30. Wuxi is a place in Jiangsu Province, situated on the northern bank of Lake Taihu.

There is another tale of Xishi that tells us what ‘reward’ awaited her for her contribution to the conquest of Wu by Yue.

In the village named Zuilicun, there lived a young man named Qin Ze. He was an intelligent and resourceful man; kindhearted but very ugly in appearance. One morning when he was going out to cut firewood, a young girl came running towards him. He covered up his face with his own hands thinking that the girl might be scared to see his ugly face. But the girl stopped in front of him and begged for help. On inquiring, the girl replied with tears in her eyes that she was Xishi of Yue and that she had helped the king of Yue to conquer the State of Wu in the recent years. Now after the conquest, the queen of Yue being jealous of her beauty wanted to drown her in the Lake Taihu. Xishi asked why Qin Ze had covered his face. Was it that he did not want to help. Qin Ze expressed his eagerness to help her, and told the reason behind covering his face. Xishi said that the ugliness and beauty of a man did not depend upon the external appearance. One is good at heart when he is ready to fight for a just cause.

Qin Ze hid Xishi in his house. Then while coming out he saw a peach tree full of fragrant blossoms. With his chopper he started chopping the tree. Meanwhile the queen of Yue reached there with her horsemen. Firstly, she was taken aback by Qin Ze’s ugly face. On inquiring about Xishi’s whereabouts, Qin Ze said that Xishi was a nice lady, and asked the queen whether it was possible that a beauty like her could meet an ugly man like him without being frightened. Saying so he cut a branch of the peach tree. The queen asked why he was cutting the branches full of flowers. Qin Ze said that he himself being so ugly, could not tolerate the beauty of peach, and that he also intended to throw the branches into water. The semi-distinct picture of the queen drawn by QinZe made her feel ashamed. She hurried back to her carriage and left.

Qin Ze asked Xishi to come out of the pit, and gave her a tub of water to wash the dust from her face. When she washed her face, the rouge fell into the water. Fearing that the queen might come again, Xishi left the place in haste. After seeing her off, Qin Ze came back and found the rouge water in the tub emitting some fragrance. He could not
resist, and sprinkled some water over his own face. Then he threw the water into the river of that village. Later when he met some people of his village, they were astonished to see his glowing appearance. The trees of that region turned lush green, and the people became more and more charming.\(^{32}\)

**Pan Fei**

The legend goes that the king of the State of Chu, Zhuangwang\(^ {33}\), had a strange distaste for salt. He specially liked taking sweet items. His wife Pan Fei took sugar at times, but she was not addicted to sugar. Just for this, they used to quarrel very often. Pan Fei used to advise the king to take more salt, less sugar. The king used to say exactly the opposite.

One day Pan Fei invited the king to a cocktail party in which she arranged ten items of food: five salty and five sweet. The king tasted each of them and became furious. When the king’s temper cooled down Pan Fei said that the king should take some salt otherwise he would lose strength. The king in a fit of anger passed an edict banning consumption of salt and allowing sole consumption of sugar throughout the country.

Before long a neighbouring country invaded Chu. The army of Chu could not even take up arms since they had not taken salt for quite a long time, and hence lacked energy and strength. When the enemy troops had penetrated deep into the territory, the king struggled to climb the tower and beat the drum. Extremely fatigued, he failed to take up the hammer. Before his eyes the city was going to fall into the enemy’s hands. He recalled the words uttered by Pan Fei. In dejection, he pulled out his sword to commit suicide. Just then his right hand was pulled back from behind. It was Pan Fei. She took up the hammer and struck the drum so hard that it sounded like a thunderbolt.

\(^{32}\) Chen Yizhong (Coll.), 'Meiren Yanzhi luo Xiushui' (The Beautiful Lady's Rouge Turns into Fine Water), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, pp.42-44.

\(^{33}\) King Zhuangwang of Chu ruled between 613 BC and 591 BC.
officers and men of the Chu army were moved to see Pan Fei strike the drum. They put together all their strength and pounced upon their enemy. The enemy was repulsed after a fierce battle.

That evening the king himself ordered wine and special dishes for Pan Fei to celebrate his victory. The king asked Pan Fei whether she wanted any other dish to be added. Pan Fei smiled and told a servant to bring a plate of spareribs in sweet-sour sauce. The king chewed a piece and spat it out, saying that he had vowed not to take sweet items any more. He also said that he planned to pass an edict banning the consumption of anything sweet. Pan Fei said that the king was going to commit another error. In a battle the swords have their utility, the arrows too have their utility. Each has its own usage at various moments of a battle. No battle can be won without using both these weapons. She asked him to be unbiased with whatever he did. The king nodded and tasted a piece of spareribs and felt sweet in his heart.34

Wang Zhaojun

Before passing the frontiers, Wang Zhaojun went back to her native place to pay a visit to her parents. After a fortnight of her stay when the time came to leave for the capital, many people gathered to wish her happiness in a send-off party. Just then came an old monk. With his head affected with favus, with nasal mucus on his face, with lice creeping all over his body, he looked horrible with crippled legs and a hunchback. He did not even utter a word of congratulation or chant incantations. After sitting down he started nibbling at the peaches, and spat here and there. The people felt disgusted and wanted to hoot him out.

Zhaojun offered the monk rice and clothes. The monk emptied the entire rice pot

34. Shu Qiquan (Coll.), 'Leigutai' (The Drum-Beating Tower), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, pp.26-27.
and put all the clothes on. Then he fixed his eyes on the pipa\textsuperscript{35} that was hanging on the wall. Zhaojun gave it to him. But the monk broke the strings and then dropped it from his hand. The pipa broke into two pieces. The people around him were about to beat him up when Zhaojun stopped them and said that the old master was dim-sighted and that it did not matter if he had broken the pipa. She urged that one should be polite to one's guest. The monk laughed and said that she was indeed a kindhearted girl. He thanked her and asked Zhaojun to accompany him to the Pipa Bridge. On the bridge with one stroke of his hand, the monk brought out a pipa and gave it to Zhaojun. When she looked at the monk again, he had already changed into an old man with white hair and ruddy complexion. Zhaojun was stupefied to see him. He was the God of Venus. The deity told Zhaojun now that she has been married to a Hun, and the Hans and the Huns have entered into a matrimonial alliance, she has become the angel of harmony between the two. He also told her that the pipa would help her whenever in need. Then Venus vanished into the blue.

Zhaojun went back to the capital and from there she went with Huhanye Chanyu\textsuperscript{36} on a horse towards the north of the Gobi desert. When they reached the Black River\textsuperscript{37}, that demarcated the border, the waves reached a great height with a violent storm. This stopped their further advance. It rained incessantly for three days. The wind and waves became increasingly violent. Zhaojun became anxious. Huhanye said that it was all due to his misdeeds that their path was blocked. He had once destroyed the bridge over the river when the relation between the two sides turned bitter. Since then the river played havoc.

\textsuperscript{35} Pipa is a plucked string instrument with a fretted finger board.

\textsuperscript{36} Huhanye became the chieftain of the Huns, known as Xiongnu in China, in 58 BC. The word 'Chanyu' is the Chinese transliteration of Khan. It is said that Wang Zhaojun willingly married Huhanye after living in oblivion for quite sometime.

\textsuperscript{37} Heihe or the Black River rises in the Qilian Mountain ranges situated between Gansu and Qinghai provinces of northwest China.
Suddenly Zhaojun recalled that the God of Venus had given her a *pipa*. She took it out and asked it for help. In no time a bridge appeared before them. Rain and wind ceased. The bridge looked just like the one where the deity had given the *pipa* to Zhaojun. The flowers bade her farewell before she crossed the bridge. From then on the Black River became the symbol of peaceful coexistence between the Hans and the Huns.\(^{38}\)

**Yang Gui Fei**

During the reign of the Tang emperor Minghuang\(^{39}\), there lived a poor old couple who had no sons, but four daughters. Only the youngest was extraordinarily beautiful and intelligent. The couple considered her as a bright jewel and gave her the name Yuhuan (jade ring). One day on her way home with her mother, she saw an old monk beating a young monk black and blue. Hearing the young one shout, the people came and stopped the old monk. The latter said that the former had stolen twelve taels of money which were given by the people as donation to the temple. The young monk had spent the entire amount so the old monk wanted to kill him. The people asked the old monk to forgive the young monk and let him atone for his crime. After the people dispersed Yang Yuhuan gave twelve taels to the old monk. Both the monks went off happily.

After a few days, Yuhuan and her mother went to the Miaodao Temple. There they were received by the old monk with highest honour. He thanked them for the help they had extended, and also blessed them. When Yuhuan was sixteen, she was chosen the highest concubine by the emperor, and was renamed Yang Gui Fei. She enjoyed all the wealth in the palace. On a brief visit back home, Gui Fei once went on her own to the temple to offer incense. Many monks came out to greet her. She thought in her mind that

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\(^{38}\) Guo Zibao & Wu Daozhou (Coll.), *Pipaqiao* (The Pipa Bridge), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, pp.76-79.

\(^{39}\) The Tang emperor Minghuang, also known as Tang Xuanzong (685-762), ruled between 712 and 756 AD. Yang Gui Fei (719-756) was named the highest-ranking imperial concubine by Minghuang in 745 AD.
if she donated a large amount of gold for the renovation of the temple, she would earn
great fame and in future she could certainly be elevated to the level of the Buddha. But
among the monks she found the old monk missing. She was enraged to hear that the latter
was busy in meditation. The old monk later came out in an ordinary dress and bowed at
her. Gui Fei deplored the monk for having treated her coolly. She said that when she was
a poor village girl, the monk had put on his religious attire before showing respect for just
twelve taels. She wanted to know the reason and also threatened him with death if he
spoke in ambiguous terms. The monk calmly said that the way he bowed at her was a folk
custom and also the way a monk expressed his greetings. He also said though she was a
poor girl, she had emptied her pocket not to fish fame and compliments. It was her
kindheartedness. Because of her virtue she was placed by the side of the emperor. And
now she was spending money like water. The monk went on saying that just to benefit
herself Gui Fei was ready to cast the sweat and blood of the masses. He reminded that
though she presently had enormous wealth but it was far inferior to half a tael of that time.
He further remarked that power had changed her nature and that she was blinded by
greed...Gui Fei did not know where to hid for shame.40

There is another tale about Yang Gui Fei. During the Tang dynasty there was a
monk named Liaoran. Once he sat under a tree and carelessly cut an earthworm into two
pieces. Thinking it a sin from his part, he took out a scripture and tore off a piece of an
empty page. With that he tied together the two broken pieces of its body. He chanted
some incantations after this. One day at noon a childless aged couple saw an old man
begging alms at their doorstep. He took the entire rice porridge that the lady had cooked,
and left. That night the lady dreamt that the beggar was putting something into her womb.
Before long she gave birth to a girl. This child had a white ring-like mark around her
waist—bright as a jade. She was named Yuhuan (jade ring).

At her adolescent age, Yuhuan became the concubine of the Tang emperor

40. Wang Qi (Coll.), 'Gui Fei Yishi' (An Anecdote of Yang
Gui Fei), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, pp.117-119.
Xuanzong. One day Xuanzong went to the Bao'en Temple to burn incense. He saw an old man who had been practising Buddhism for several hundred years, and could tell the past and future of any person through his farsightedness. On asking about the white mark around Gui Fei's waist, the emperor came to know the entire story. The ring was a piece of page from a scripture.

That night Xuanzong slept with Gui Fei and on seeing the mark he exclaimed that Master Liaoran had indeed told the truth. Gui Fei came to know from Xuanzong what all had happened in the temple. She was a paranoid. She thought that Liaoran must be knowing everything about her. So she asked someone to kill a few swallows and put poison into the meat before making it into dumplings. She sent a person to present the dish to Liaoran. Thus, she thought, she can destroy the monk's monastic discipline and also eradicate him from her way.

Liaoran knew Gui Fei's intention beforehand. He asked other monks to dig holes, and bury the swallow meat dumplings in the vegetable garden of the monastery. After sometime a variety of vegetables started growing there: looking like the swallow head was garlic; like the swallow's wings was Chinese chive; like the body and tail of a swallow was green onion. Since Yang Gui Fei had wanted to poison the monk, so garlic, chive or onion are terribly hot in taste and they emit pungent odour if taken raw.

Later An Lushan led a rebellion and occupied the capital. Xuanzong fled with Yang Gui Fei towards Sichuan. On their midway, at Maweipo, the officers and men--the entourage of Xuanzong--revolted, and killed the treacherous minister Yang.

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41. An Lushan (d.757) led a bloody rebellion in 755 AD, and in 756 AD occupied the Tang capital Chang'an. He named his dynasty as Yan, and took the reigning title "Shengwu" (The Holy Warrior). However, in 757 AD An Lushan was killed by his son An Qingxu who had conspired to capture the throne.

42. Maweipo is situated in Shaanxi province.
Guozhong⁴³. Then they asked Xuanzong to execute Yang Gui Fei. Otherwise they would refuse to protect him. Seeing his own security at stake, Xuanzong asked Gui Fei to commit suicide. Gui Fei hung herself unto death. After death she turned into an earthworm and went on nibbling the earth. Now the white mark that we notice around the waist of an earthworm is where Liaoran had once tied a piece of paper.⁴⁴

Dong Xiaoyuan

Dong Xiaoyuan⁴⁵ was a court singer by the end of the Ming dynasty. She was beautiful and artistic. Once she met a scholar named Mao Pijiang. After their marriage they lived in Hangzhou. But before long Hangzhou fell into the hands of the Manchu army. Dong Xiaoyuan fell into the hands of Hong Chengchou, a former official in the Ming court, and later a governor after defecting to the Manchus. Though he himself wanted to make Xiaoyuan his concubine, but he failed to do so since Xiaoyuan wanted to preserve her chastity by committing suicide. So Hong gifted her to the Manchu emperor Shunzhi.

Emperor Shunzhi kept Dong Xiaoyuan in Lanxingong (Orchid Fragrance Palace) laid out in a quiet and picturesque place. One day Xiaoyuan told the emperor that she was married and that she wanted to be freed. The emperor laughed, and by pulling her hands he wanted to embrace her. Xiaoyuan freed herself and declared that she wished to crush her own head against the wall if Shunzhi wanted to touch her. After that Shunzhi used to

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⁴³. Yang Guozhong, a cousin of Yang Gui Fei, made use of the latter's position as an imperial concubine, and managed to get a high post in the court of Emperor Xuanzong. He resorted to bribery, corruption and nepotism.


⁴⁵. Dong Xiaoyuan (1624-1651) is said to have changed several hands before being chosen as an imperial concubine by Emperor Shizu (whose reigning title was Shunzhi, 1644-1661) of the Qing Dynasty. However, the popular tales say something quite different.
send jewels and many other valuable things for Xiaoyuan. But she always refused to accept. Once Shunzhi sent four boxes of white-cored orchid. She accepted it because it reminded her of her husband. When once more Shunzhi failed to obtain Xiaoyuan's consent, he said that he was going to become a saint. Seeing this as a threat to herself, Xiaoyuan asked Shunzhi to observe three things in order to win her love. Firstly, in the palace a hall should be arranged for reading scriptures for her self cultivation; secondly, no official or empress should visit her; and thirdly, their relationship would be monarch and concubine just in name but not in reality. Shunzhi had to accept all the three conditions. He sighed and said it was pitiful that an emperor could not get a sincere heart that an ordinary scholar could get.

The emperor used to go to see Xiaoyuan very often. At last the empress came to know that Shunzhi had taken a Han girl as his concubine against the Manchu convention. She and the queen mother together conspired to get rid of Dong Xiaoyuan. On the other hand, Mao Pijiang wrote to his uncle Qian Qianyi, who was working as a high official in the capital, expressing his wish to see his wife. Qian was a resourceful man. He made contacts with a eunuch serving inside the palace and asked him to disguise Mao as an eunuch before finding him a way to Xiaoyuan's palace. The eunuch sketched a plan so that Mao could escape if in danger. Mao was elated to hear the eunuch praise Xiaoyuan for preserving her chastity.

At last Mao entered the palace under disguise. Dong Xiaoyuan could recognize her husband without much difficulty. In the inner chamber they wept bitterly for their cruel fate. Time passed and the moon rose into the sky. Mao was to leave. Just at this moment, before their parting, the door was kicked open. Mao jumped through the window and fled. Eight sentries entered the room. The empress and the queen mother stood behind them. On enquiring, Xiaoyuan replied that none had entered her room. Infuriated, the two ladies asked Xiaoyuan to hang herself. Seeing that she can never escape from the palace, Xiaoyuan hung herself to preserve her pure conjugal love. When Shunzhi rushed and found her dead he cried madly for her. He regretted over his failure
to protect her life. Life became meaningless to him. He found it futile to remain on the throne, and ultimately decided to become a monk. 46

3.2 CHINESE WOMENLORE: INTERPRETATION

There is no doubt that Ban Zhao was a scholarly lady of her times, and had earned the highest honour in her life for her sound knowledge in various subjects. However, she was an exponent of Confucian ethics: "The wife must always listen to her husband. The husband is master to the wife." 47 According to feudal codes and ethics, the relation between husband and wife were the same as those between the emperor and his ministers. Ban Zhao's book Nü Jie ruled, "The wife serves the husband in the way the filial son serves his father and the loyal minister serves his emperor. The husband is the Heaven." Thus inferiority of women was propounded by another woman, that is, Ban Zhao.

The seven chapters of Nü Jie 48 detailing the moral concepts for women, are "Modesty", "Husband and Wife", "Earnestness and Prudence", "Conduct", "Chastity", "Forgiveness" and "Be Kind to your Husband's Brothers and Sisters." Though considered a woman of learning, Ban Zhao not only disgraced her own kind--the womanhood, but also acted as a tool to promote male chauvinism by inventing device for oppression of women.

It is perhaps the legacy of feudalism and feudal ethics that a woman, married or unmarried, had no name or surname of her own. For instance, Qiao Gu, Xiu Niang, Hudie Liu, Chagu, Baisha Guniang, Baihua Gongzhu, Zhinü--all these are names which were given to them later by the common people. These names reflect either their

46. Hu Yuegeng & Chen Delai (Coll.), 'Bei Qiang Ru Gong' (Forced into the Palace) and 'Junwang Nanbao Ruonü' (The Emperor could not Save the Weak Girl), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, pp.140-146.

47. Wang Deyi & Wu Changzhen, 'The Relations Between Law and Families: The Old Family', in Women of China (in English), Beijing, April 1985, p.12.

48. See n.47.
occupation, skill and knowledge in some specific field, or bring out their characteristic features. The mother of Lu Ban had no name or surname in spite of her being instrumental in solving problems confronted by her son. The mothers of Mencius and Xu Xiake were mentioned solely by their surnames.

The word 'Qiao' in the name Qiao Gu, literally means skilful, ingenious and clever. In fact, not only Qiao Gu but Xiu Niang, Hudie Liu and Chagu can all be termed as 'Qiao'. A Chinese phrase rightly puts it--"Qiao duo tiangong", that is, superb craftsmanship excel nature. Indeed it was Xiu Niang and Hudie Liu who excelled nature. The witty answers of Qiao Gu and Chagu actually invite admiration for the quick-witted country folk and their wisdom. Because they were the ones who had spun their wits into lively stories of their own life. The people expressed their thanks to Xiu Niang, an expert in embroidery, for eradicating the menace. She was considered a saviour. Chagu too was remembered for her ready wits and ultimately for defeating the landlord in furthering his own vicious scheme.

Many of these tales share a common theme that centre round the age-old equation between the oppressor and the oppressed. In most of the cases the oppressed are seen teaching lessons to the oppressors. This is the peculiarity of Chinese folktales. The Chinese history is riddled with peasant rebellions. This long tradition of dissatisfaction with the corrupt rulers and subsequent uprisings is, no doubt, a part of the Chinese ethos. Such ethos has been inlaid into the core of Chinese folk literature since time immemorial.

Most of the stories, such as those of Xiu Niang, Qiao Gu or Hudie Liu, do not tell us the names of the landlords. They are simply termed as tyrants, or "big moneybags", or at the most called by their official posts they held. Such obliteration of names was systematized in China after 1949, that is after the communist government found it convenient for the purpose of propagating the concept of class struggle among the masses.

The stories about Lu Ban, the master craftsman, are very popular especially to the
south of the Yangzi River. His stories centre round the city of Hangzhou. In Hangzhou, the invention of umbrella is attributed to the sister of Lu Ban. Whereas in the city of Zhenjiang of Jiangsu Province, the credit has been given to Lu Ban’s mother. But in both the cases, umbrella has been referred to as ‘half pavilion’, ‘little pavilion’ or ‘moving pavilion’. This indicates that umbrella was made, keeping in mind, the structure of a pavilion. Now, of course, the character for umbrella is a pictographic representation of a pavilion:  with four men under it seeking protection from rain or sun.

The mother of Mencius was right to a great extent in her search for a better environment for her son’s upbringing. The factor of neighbourhood is definitely vital for a child’s future attitude towards life as well as towards building his personality. The method Zhang adopted by cutting the loom-threads, was an indirect way to persuade her son to pay proper attention to his studies. The cutting of threads had a psychological effect over the mind of little Mencius. He realized that his mother had suffered heavy loss just for his sake. She did it in order to make him conscious about his future prospect.

Xu Xiake’s mother was an uncommon person because she attached more importance to her son’s gaining of pure knowledge than contend for an official position in the government. Neither Xu nor his mother wished to be associated with the corrupt Ming government. Wang made her son grow into a man of broad outlook. She made a light travel kit for Xu and asked him to make painstaking effort and write down the geographical aspects that he would observe on his way. *Xu Xiake Youji* (Journeys of Xu Xiake) is an important work for its profound and systematic analysis and investigations on the laws of nature. His mother was surely the main spirit behind his intellectual pursuits.

In spite of being a person of flesh and blood, Huashan was a fictitious character. The expanse of water from the eastern sea that filled the space between Wuyishan and Alishan, was actually the Taiwan Strait. The daughter yearning for her mother turned into a towering tree. This is the legendary Simushu or ‘the tree that longs for its mother’. It stands on top of Alishan in Taiwan. The mother gazing at her daughter turned into a rock. This is the legendary Wangnūshi or ‘the rock that gazes at its daughter’. It stands on top
of Wuyishan situated in the Chinese mainland. The people remembered the continental drift that had occurred once upon a time which left behind a world of fragmented land masses.

Both the people on the mainland and in Taiwan, in spite of being Chinese ethnically, could not meet their kith and kin on the other side of the strait due to the rough waves of the sea. The strait that came into their way for a reunion was believed to have been a creation of a demon. The trees and the rocks are the mute witness to the happenings of the world. That is why they have been chosen to represent the unfortunate souls panging for reunion. The Taiwan Strait brings a melancholic tale of separation forced upon by an evil being. Such was the explanation offered by narratives, such was the reasoning made by the early man to voice their aspiration.

Huang Chao's fording of the river by the supernaturally erected bridge reflects the people's aspiration to describe Huang Chao as a god-sent saviour of the poor. This, in fact, has been seen in the light of the Mandate of Heaven (tianming). Such depiction is generally noticed whenever it comes to a struggle against a corrupt government disliked by the people.

Baisha Guniang died for a just cause. She saved the person whom she considered a hero and a saviour of the poor. But her sincere hope for a better life met with a tragic end. This immortalized her undaunted spirit.

Baihua Gongzhu was in fact a girl without name. She became famous all of a sudden for her heroic deeds, resourcefulness and sense of justice. She earned the name 'Baihua' because she was the hundredth girl initially decided to be taken to the emperor's harem. In Chinese literature, girls are often compared with flowers. She became the saviour of ninety-nine girls and was placed with great honour. That is why she was called Gongzhu, the princess. The psychological pressure that Baihua and Fang La put over the minds of their enemies, can be traced back to the age-old tradition of China. Confucius said that a bad king is unworthy of his throne. Later the Buddhist concept of
egalitarianism gave new dimension to the Chinese thought of right to rebel. And such rebellions against despotic rulers were given a new shape in the form of Mandate of Heaven (tianming). The Heaven was considered as having given the power to the rebels to overthrow the evil forces. That is why the troops which confronted those of Baihua, had been unnerved at the very probability of a battle, and were thus firstly defeated mentally and then routed practically.

Out of her love and respect for her father, Mulan replaced her father and herself went to the front to fight a long-drawn war. Mulan has been eulogized for her filial piety. But unfortunately her mother turned out to be detrimental to Mulan's future activities. She was solely responsible for Mulan's tragic end. She was a woman who was herself an oppressor of woman. Mulan became a prey to feudal ethics of foot-binding for women. Women were not only barred from getting formal education, they were also barred from taking part in war. So Mulan had to disguise as a young man. After much achievement she succumbed to the piercing eyes of the soldiers. To them she was now nothing more than a woman. Mulan was overwhelmed with shame after being reduced from an honoured general to a character under scrutiny. The feudal norms left her alone in a blind alley even when she had contributed much for safeguarding her motherland.

Liu Hulan commands admiration because she showed extraordinary courage and embraced martyrdom at the tender age of fifteen. The amount of conviction she had of her responsibility to guard her party comrades from persecution, was indeed rare.

The story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai ends with a fantasy. It reflects the power of deep and sincere love. The unfortunate souls became alive in the form of butterflies. The feudal concept of linking happiness with wealth took its toll. But love did not yield to coercion.

The story of Niulang and Zhinü is an astronomical myth of Vega and Altair that paints the paradise with black ink, depicting it as a domain of bondage and sorrow. The human world has been tinged with the rays of joy and freedom. This is typical of the
Chinese world view that heaven is no more than a human fantasy, and that ideal happiness can be built on earth only by human beings. The tyrannical goddess, the Royal Mother of Paradise, is the symbol of authoritarianism. Zhinü's descending on earth and marrying an earthling was considered a crime. In Chinese, 'xique' means magpie. The word 'xi' in 'xique' is happiness. Magpies bring happiness to the couple once in a year. In the traditional Chinese custom, magpies are believed to be usherers of happiness.

The story of the White Lady relates the victory of Buddhism over Taoism. It also projects the tussle between the obscurantist method adopted by Fahai and a rationalistic approach of the White Lady in curing ailments. The people rather chose herbal medicine than magic pills for effective cure of diseases. The magic of the Taoists had failed to make positive impression in the people's mind. More and more people accepted Buddhism in course of time. The stealing of Buddha's 'triratna' (triple jewel) by Fahai exposes the dishonesty of the Taoist priests and their committing of injustice by bullying people with their magical power. Buddha's supremacy has been asserted in the story by leaving Fahai in a helpless state after the former's retrieval of the 'triratna'. The White Lady earned merit by saving the life of a green snake, by providing free medicine for the poor, and also by saving her husband's life at a great risk. But much before that, through several other philanthropic deeds the White Lady had earned good karma before being able to transform into a human being.

The side-walking nature of crabs has been attributed to the tyrannical attitude of Fahai. This is how the early narrators of China found it convenient to explain the queer movement of the crustacean in the garb of a myth. Though no logic is involved in such an explanation, yet it brings out the rich imaginative mind of the story-teller.

In the story of Meng Jiang Nü, we find the first emperor of China -- Qin Shihuang, undertaking the construction of a long frontier wall, later known as the Great Wall of China. We find a broad variation of the name of Meng Jiang Nü's husband. In ancient times, two charactered names were in vogue. Later during the Song and Yuan (Mongol) dynasties he got a three-charactered name. But even then, the name got quite a few
variations: Fan Qiliang, Fan Xiliang, Wan Xiliang etc. In the Suzhou dialect, there is no distinction between 'Fan' and 'Wan'.

From another angle we would see that Qin Shihuang on failing to build the wall at particular places, was advised by an astrologer to bury a man with the family name Wan at each mile of the structure. 'Wan' in Chinese means 'ten thousand'. The astrologer maintained that the wall will not collapse any more in its course of ten thousand li because the spirits of the Wans would protect it from falling. Meng Jiang Nü's husband with the surname Wan was appropriate for fulfilling the requirement. He was buried under the wall either after his death caused by excessive fatigue, or before his death just to 'ensure' the protection of the wall. Most probably he was sacrificed because Wei Jiangong's article points out to the discovery of Fan Xiliang's head from another spot beneath the wall.

Meng Jiang Nü was mentioned in Lie Nü Zhuan (Biographies of Chaste Women) as Qiliang's Wife who committed suicide in the Zi River after having her husband buried. After all we are not sure about the river in which Meng Jiang Nü had taken her life. Some tales say it was the Yellow River, some say it was the Zi River of the Shandong Province. In this story the collapse of a portion of the Great Wall has been emphasized in order to eulogize Meng Jiang Nü's devotion to her husband and also the maintaining of her chastity as demanded by the Confucian moral code. The Great Wall was made to crumble at the pitiful lament of Meng Jiang Nü over her dead husband with the purpose of showing deep respect to chaste women like her.


50. Lie Nü Zhuan was compiled by Liu Xiang (c.77-6 BC), a scholar of the Han era (206 BC-220 AD).

51. Wei, n.49, p.43.

Liu Lanzhi is the heroine in *Gushi wei Jiao Zhongqing-qiu zuo* (An Ancient Poem on the Bride of Jiao Zhongqing), the narrative poem that first appeared in *Yutai Xinyong* (Anthology of Poems) edited by Xu Ling during the Chen dynasty (557-589 AD). In a preface to the poem, he stated that it was written at the end of the Han dynasty by an unknown author in Han-styled poetic genre (*yuefu*) of folk songs and ballads. Faithful to each other, Lanzhi and her husband revolted against feudal morality by taking their own lives. Jiao Zhongqing did not dare to oppose his mother because he was bound to observe the feudal ethical rules. Being a petty official himself, he was weak in character. The author indicted the feudal patriarchal system by vividly portraying the vicious characters and the tragic fate of the lovers.

Out of the two stories on filial piety, one was wrongly victimized for taking good care of her father-in-law; and the other got a good lesson for ill-treating her mother-in-law. In the former case, we can recall what Lu Xun had once said, "Rumours can kill people." But here miracle took place. The deity of Taishan rewarded the widow by saving her life and made it known to public that she was indeed a chaste woman and that she had fulfilled her filial duties. Though at the very end things were highly unrealistic, yet the story is a befitting lesson to the accusing fingers and vilifying tongues that proved to be totally subjective and counter-productive.

In this context we are reminded of the dutiful lady who being poor had cooked her own flesh for her mother-in-law. The latter having misunderstood the former’s intention, asked the Thunder God to kill the former. The Thunder God wrongly killed her. Later she was found to be a virtuous lady and thereupon she was brought back to the world as the Goddess of Lightning. We have already come across this story in the second chapter.

In the story of Baosi we should notice that the beauty hailed from the State of Bao and her family name was Si. She was offered as a tribute to the Zhou king. Baosi unconsciously acted as a tool in the hands of Youwang’s enemies. She was unlike Xishi who was fully conscious of her mission.
In Chinese folk belief, Xishi is the patroness of merchants, of face creams and perfumes. She was the daughter of a butcher and became a royal concubine. When she was presented to the emperor, she smelled so sweet that the odour could be noticed for ten li. Time and again in various stories Xishi has been described as extremely beautiful. In such a case where an ugly man like Qin Ze could turn handsome, Xishi can surely be called the Goddess of Beauty.

The queen of Yue represents jealousy with all her despotic power. She is again another woman who was instrumental in systematic persecution of women. She is said to have drowned many beautiful girls of her times. Even the court singers were not spared.

In the case of Pan Fei, it was her love and loyalty for the king that saved the State of Chu from a grave crisis. Her unbiased logic behind a balanced diet, required for the proper functioning of human body, bore fruits when the king of Chu stood on the verge of defeat. The arrogant king took to modesty when Pan Fei proved herself right.

An element of supernaturalism is to be noticed in the story of Wang Zhaojun. The Venus descended on earth to give her an effective means to remedy for all problems. Wang Zhaojun entered the harem of the Western Han emperor Yuandi. After staying in oblivion for some time she chose to marry the Hun chieftain Huhanye Chanyu when the latter asked for a matrimonial alliance in the year 33 BC. Wang Zhaojun played a significant role in restoring peace between the Hans and the Huns by contributing much to the material civilization of the latter.

Yang Gui Fei brought disgrace and destruction on herself by acting a tyrant. The first story tells how an honest and kindhearted girl became degenerated after living in lap of luxury and enjoying the ill-gotten wealth of the imperial house. The second story is

54. Ping Sheng (Coll.), 'Taodao Taihubian' (Escape to the Banks of Lake Taihu), in Xu (Ed.), n.26, p.50.
mixed with some distinct element of fantasy; Yang Gui Fei turned into an earthworm. This is apparently to say that it was her bad *karma* that made her into an earthworm—worth relegating to oblivion. Her misdeeds were so enormous that retribution for evil came both in this life and after life.

Dong Xiaoyuan died to preserve her chastity. The story highlights the purity of her love. The Manchu emperor failed to win her love which remained sealed forever only for her husband. Her love dwelled far away from the lures of the imperial wealth. Her love transcended the materialistic bond of love and reached a spiritual level from where she could justify her physical non-existence for the sake of putting an end to any sort of transgression.

### 3.3 TIBETAN WOMENLORE: NARRATION

In Tibet, such women gained prominence who dedicated their lives to the cause of propagating the Buddhist doctrine among the people. the Great Tradition virtually obliterated the Little Tradition which could have otherwise sung songs in praise of those women whose contribution lie outside the purview of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhist or Lamaist thoughts are so deeply rooted in the psyché and ethos of the Tibetans that the greatness of women is centred solely around renunciation of worldly living, austerity and spreading of Buddhist beliefs. Perhaps no other contribution is regarded so great as the dissemination of religious thoughts.

The Little Tradition did not even get a fraction of a chance to flourish in Tibet perhaps due to the people’s preoccupation with the complexities of Lamaism. Due to the powerful preachings of Buddhism, the tales about women mystics and their achievements, narrated by the Great Tradition, became part and parcel of the popular folk tradition of Tibet. In other words, in Tibet women became the subject of folklore when they excelled in religious pursuit. For women to transcend the limitations imposed by male dominated society, to strive for enlightenment and also for name and identity which ensures them a place in society, the Tibetan folk heroines are depicted as following the path shown by
Buddha to liberation. That is, first they are shown as renouncing the material conditions and society, secondly, following and practising Dharma leading to their emancipation. Thus they appear as models for not only womankind but also for men as teachers of Buddhism.

Apart from this, we can find many feminine figures among the Buddhist divinities popular among the Tibetans. These goddesses have been integrated into the Tibetan ethos to such an extent that they become no less important subject of folklore. However, we have discussed about them in the second chapter.

Given such situation, we can only put the womenlore of Tibet under a single category: Women of Enlightenment.

Nangsa Obum (Snang-sa 'od-'bum: Seed of Intelligence with Millions of Lights)

The story of Nangsa is set in the 11th century in central Tibet, in the province of Tsang. The story tells us that Nangsa was born in an ordinary family. She was born after her mother had an auspicious dream. Nangsa was peerlessly beautiful, and on the other hand, very pious, compassionate and wise. All the time she chanted the mantras of Avalokiteśvara and Tārā, and was never forgetful of her filial duty.

When she was fifteen, Nangsa once went to a festival in the local town. There she attracted the attention of the Lord of Rinang, Dragchen who had been in search of a bride for his son Dragpa Samdrub. After arriving at the monastery, Nangsa had made her offerings, and had requested initiation from the lama. But when she fell into the hands of the king, she could hardly disobey the royal command. Nangsa's parents were happy to give their daughter in marriage to a royal family. Nangsa, though eager to follow the


56. Allione, n.55, p.69.
Dharma, ultimately had to comply with the decision of her parents and the king. After marriage Nangsa was given the keys of the house. But the king's daughter, Ani Nyemo, who was previously keeping the keys, felt jealous of Nangsa. Ani Nyemo often used to treat her badly by giving her spoilt food and torn clothes. Once when Nangsa and Ani Nyemo went to the fields to oversee the workers, two yogis asked Nangsa for alms. When Ani Nyemo misbehaved with them, Nangsa felt sorry and gave them a few bundles of harvested barley. For the kindness shown by Nangsa, Ani Nyemo furiously attacked her. After some altercation, Ani Nyemo beat Nangsa mercilessly. Drakpa Samdrub was made to understand that Nangsa had committed something unfaithful to her husband. Nangsa, who did not reveal the truth in fear of creating trouble between brother and sister, was thereupon beaten by her husband even more severely until her body started bleeding and his servants persuaded him to stop.

At that time, the lama Sākya Gyaltsen from the Sera Yarlung monastery came and stood beneath Nangsa's window in a guise of a handsome, poor beggar with a monkey. He sang songs to Nangsa, urging her to renounce the mundane world and to devote herself to religion. Nangsa asked the beggar to enter her room. There she gave him her precious ornaments. Nangsa's son was busy playing with the monkey. The lord, hearing the voice of a man in his daughter-in-law's inner chamber, peeped in and discovered what was happening. Furious at the sight, and thinking that Ani's story must be true, he beat Nangsa mercilessly. Her son was torn away from her that night. Nangsa suffered a heart attack and died. Next morning she was found dead. According to the saying of the astrologer, her body was wrapped in a white shroud and put on the eastern mountain for seven days. By then Nangsa's spirit had flown to the Bardo, where she met Mrityupati.

Yamaraja, the Lord of Death. She was frightened to see the sufferings of people in the hot and cold hells. Yamaraja, on judging her vices and virtues, found that Nangsa was pure and blameless. He told her to return to the world and practise the Dharma.

Nangsa decided to become a nun. But before long, she was again drawn into domestic life, this time on the earnest request of her son. Having failed to change the hearts of her relatives, Nangsa went to her parents' home from where she was finally expelled. Nangsa travelled through a moonlit night and reached the Yarlung monastery. There she met Lama Sákya Gyaltsen and became his disciple.

The news of Nangsa's entry into the monastery reached the ears of the king of Rinang. He sent an army with a plan to destroy the monastery. After a bloody battle the lama was taken prisoner and threatened by the king. At this moment, the lama soared into space, and so did Nangsa. At the sight of Nangsa's miraculous flight, the king and his soldiers surrendered their arms to the lama and regretted their awful behaviour. They all became religious practitioners. But Nangsa was seen no more.

**Machig Labdron (Ma-gcig labs-sgron: Unique Mother, Lamp of Eloquence) (1055-1152)**

In 1054 Machig entered her mother's womb after being Monlam Drup, an Indian

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60. Cf. Tseten (Tr.), n.57, p.332.


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pundit born in India, in her immediate past life. Her mother dreamt that four blue dakinis devouring her black heart that had been extracted by a black dakinī. And that the latter replaced her heart with a white conch inscribed with an "A" (symbol) emanating light rays. The black dakinī planted five coloured rays through her crown. And in 1055 Machig Labdron was born.

At the age of nine she became a superfast reader of the four volumes of Prajñāpāramitā. Geshe Drapa Ngonshe, a monk scholar, being impressed by her abilities, instructed her in the Kadampa teachings, particularly emphasizing the oral tradition of Prajñāpāramitā. Machig received many teachings from Phadampa Sangye, a south Indian monk scholar. With a vast knowledge in her heart, Machig founded the Zhibyed school in the south of Ù. She got further encouragement from Sonam Lama, a great master of Sutra and Tantra. Gradually she severed her attachment to the concept of a permanent and unchanging self. The five signs were detachment to clothes, friends, place, food and emotions. Machig began the powerful practice of Chō (gcod), stressing the development of the six perfections of giving or generosity (dāna), morality or discipline (shīla), patience or forbearance (kshānti), energy or effort (virya), and

64. Elisabeth Benard, 'Ma-chig Lab-dron', in Chö Yang: The Voice of Tibetan Religion and Culture, No.3, n.d., p.44. "A" symbolizes the pure undefiled consciousness.
66. Benard, n.64, p.45.
68. See above, n.66.
meditation (samādhi) culminating in profound cognition or insight (prajñā). 69

Once when Sonam Lama was giving special empowerment to Machig and others, Machig having realized wisdom directly and with a profoundly stabilized state of mind, flew to a hot spring. A Nāga residing there, tried to frighten her. But she remained unperturbed and offered her body to him. Her egolessness won the heart of the Nāga who vowed to protect her and her teachings. 70

Sonam Lama sent Machig to a patroness, Lhamo Dronma, to read Prajñāpāramitā verses for the childless couple. There she dreamt of a dakini, an emanation of Tārā, telling her to unite means and profound cognition with Topabhadra, a great Indian yogi of Cakrasamvara. Topabhadra was staying at the house to perform certain ritual. He and Machig often had discussions. Finally one day they united themselves to create an enormous light. However, they had to leave Ü and Tsang due to malicious gossip. They had many children with spiritual talent. 71

In her mid-thirties, Machig left her family in order to practise Dharma and teach. She was said to be able to cure numerous diseases and sicknesses. She earned reputation as a scholar, practitioner and healer. When Machig was 52, three Indian scholars came to Tibet to meet her. She was challenged by the pundits, but she ultimately convinced them of her teachings after defeating them in a debate. Machig delivered a lecture for seven days on all the Buddhas and explained their teachings. For the first time the Dharma in the form of Mahamudra Chö, a practice initiated by Machig, was introduced from Tibet to India. After imparting wisdom to her sixteen main disciples, Machig passed away to the pure realm of the dakinis in 1152. 72


70. Benard, n.64, p.46.

71. Benard, n.64, p.47. Lo Bue, n.65, p.484.

72. Benard, n.64, pp.47-50.
Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye-shes mtso-rgyal: Enlightened Mind, the Queen of Ocean)

An eighth century Tibetan woman, a spiritual figure, a teacher and an enlightened consort appeared before a previous Buddha as a lady-merchant and expressed her vow never to be reborn except to benefit sentient beings. Eventually she became the Goddess Ganga and Sākyamuni Buddha. Then Padmasambhava reflected that it was time for the Goddess Sarasvati to manifest and help him spread the Mantrayāna teachings. This led to Tsogyel's human conception and birth.73

In the story of conception of Tsogyel, we come to know that the Vajra of the Yab (male principle) joined the Lotus of the Yum (female principle) and together they entered the state of great equanimity. The Great Bliss of the Yab-Yum penetrated everywhere into all realms of the world, and great tremors and earthquakes shook the universe. Light rays burst forth like shooting stars from the union of the Yab and Yum. The red letter A (𑀠) came into view, and from it spiralled a garland of white vowels. The white letter VAM (𑀵) appeared and from it spiralled a chain of red consonants. The lights and letters penetrated into the world, striking the ground in Tibet. A prince of twenty-five and his queen had extraordinary visions, and after nine months a female infant was born with unusual abilities.74

Despite such extraordinary conception and birth, Tsogyel's parents did not appreciate her potentialities and were concerned primarily with making a proper marriage for Tsogyel. Since her beauty aroused jealousy between the kings, her marriage was difficult to arrange. Her parents sent her away whereupon she was captured by bandits. Tsogyel's resistance had her feet sunk into a boulder as if it were mud. Her captors


74. Gross, n.73, p.15.
whipped her until she bled and submitted. But she managed to escape when her captors were busy drinking and celebrating her capture. Tsogyel then subsisted on fruits in a cave. Finally, the king took Tsogyel as his wife. Being eager to learn the Buddhist teachings, the king gave Tsogyel to Padmasambhava as part of his offering. Particular disapproval was aroused amongst the Tibetan nobles by the fact that Padmasambhava persuaded the king to give him one of his wives. Ultimately Yeshe Tsogyel became the fifth consort or special dakini of Padmasambhava. She travelled to the Nepal valley and found her consort Atsara Sale, the redeemed slave. In her entire life time, Tsogyel found many consorts and disciples. Male companionship, heterosexual experience and the presence of male energy were important to her as a component of the total path of spiritual discipline she had trodden.

Dorje Phagmo (Rdo-rje phag-mo: Vajravarāhī=Thunderbolt Sow)

Dorje Phagmo, a Buddhist goddess is believed to be incarnated as the abbess of the monastery of Samding in Yamdok lake-district of central Tibet. She, the only female reincarnation spiritually and officially recognized in the whole of Tibet and famous throughout Central Asia, is also known as Samding Dorje Phagmo—"The Thunderbolt Sow of Soaring Meditation".

Dorje Phagmo is believed to be the human incarnation of Dolma (Tārā), the spiritual consort of Chenrezig (Avalokiteśvara). Tradition has it that in olden days when Buddhism was threatened, Dolma and Chenrezig took the wrathful forms of the pig-headed Dorje Phagmo and the horse-necked Tamdrin (Hayagrīva) and together

75.  Gross n.73, p.16.

76.  Hoffmann, n.67, p.55. Apart from Yeshe Tsogyel, Padmasambhava had four other consorts: the Indian consort Mandāravā, two Nepalese consorts Kālasiddhī and Sākyadevī, and a woman named Bkra-shis khye-'dren from the southern Himalayas belonging to the people whom the Tibetans call Mon.

77.  Gross, n.73, pp.20-27.
bestowed unto themselves the sacred duty of defending Buddhism against its enemies.

Legend has it that the spiritual influence and power of Dorje Phagmo keeps within bounds the fiery water of Dremo Tso, one of the two sister lakes of Yamdok Tso, which if overflown would flood the whole of Tibet. A Tibetan myth says that the whole Dremo Tso area is shaped like a she-devil (dremo) lying on her back facing the sky. And the Samding monastery situated right on the heart of the she-devil as a guard against her evil designs.

People around the Yamdok lake fish and butcher cattles for their livelihood. Because of this Yamdok was also considered a very sinful place in Tibet. It is held that Dorje Phagmo incarnations come to Samding to save the people from committing such sinful acts and deliver them to the path of Enlightenment. 78

The 4th Dorje Phagmo is said to have taken into herself the epidemic threatening the whole of Yamdok. This made her complexion dark and pockmarked. 79

In 1716, the Dzungur Tartars came to raid and ransack Samding monastery. On hearing that the abbess had a pig’s head as an excrescence behind her ear, he mocked at her in public. Dorje Phagmo only besought him to abandon his evil designs. Burning with wrath, the warriors destroyed the walls of the monastery. On entering they found only eighty pigs and eighty sows grunting under the lead of a bigger sow. The Tartars were startled at finding a place guarded only by hogs. Amazed at the sight, the invaders stopped the pillage. Then suddenly the hogs transformed into venerable monks and nuns headed by Dorje Phagmo. Instead of plundering, the awe-struck Tartars enriched the Samding monastery with the things they had looted from other monasteries. 80

78. K. Dhondup & Tashi Tsering, 'Samdhing Dorjee Phagmo -- Tibet's Only Female Incarnation', in Tibetan Review, August 1979, p.11.
79. Dhondup & Tsering, n.78, p.13.
In 1904, during the British invasion, Waddell and his sepoys made curious visits to the Samding monastery only to find a diseased, old and ugly lady sitting on the throne of the 4th Dorje Phagmo, Jetsun Chonyid Dechen Tsomo, believed to be the most famous, pious and powerful of the lineage. Waddell was told that the present incarnation was actually a child of six years and had left for Lhasa with her mother a year prior to their visit.  

3.4 Tibetan Womenlore: Interpretation

Nangsa secretly yearned to go into retreat and practise meditation although she appeared to be fulfilling her role as loving wife and mother. Nangsa underwent great suffering, both spiritually and physically, because of the undercurrent of such unfulfilled longing. Nangsa’s apparent detachment from her family life and an insatiable thirst for dharmic initiation finally found a solution on her separation from her husband at the time of her death. Nangsa maintained a silent, non-defending position vis-à-vis Ani Nyemo’s jealous accusations against her. She forced on herself all sorts of ill-treatment by her in-laws and husband by her instinctive actions of giving alms to the yogis and the beggar. The situation in which she was supposed to remain contented with the royal wealth around her, deprived her of her spiritual quest and satisfaction which she sought to obtain through philanthropic deeds. The path Nangsa wished to choose, incessantly urged her to do something good for others. Her benevolent attitude which seemed unusual to others, met with harshness and cruelty.

Ani Nyemo, herself a feminine character, played a negative role which brought Nangsa’s life to an end. But viewing from another angle, we would find that it was Ani Nyemo who brought Nangsa’s silent depression to an end. A confrontation between the collective standards represented by the palace life and Nangsa’s inner spiritual life was caused by Ani Nyemo. This confrontation eventually led to Nangsa’s release from this

81. Dhondup & Tsering, n.78, p.12.
Nangsa's coming back to life from hell invigorated her resolution to pursue spiritualism. This also proved that Lord Rinang and his son and daughter had done injustice to her by wrongly labelling her as unfaithful. Faced with the wrath of her husband and in-laws, abandoned by her mother, and separated from her son, Nangsa took a determined and courageous step towards renunciation of everything mundane. She was proved correct and her spiritual pursuit was proved supreme when the power of her teacher and herself triumphed over the material strength of her husband's army. All those involved in inflicting harm to Nangsa were elevated to an improved level following her flight to paradise. First her descent to hell, then her coming back to the worldly life, and lastly her ascent to nirvana—all reflect different phases in her life.

Machig Labdron is one of the most renowned and beloved of Tibetan woman mystics. She is said to be an incarnation of Yeshe Tsogyel, the eighth-century consort of Padmasambhava. Machig Labdron was an integral part of the great renaissance of Buddhism which occurred in the 11th century in Tibet. She became particularly famous for her teachings of the Mahāmudra gcod, literally "to cut", the word gcod (རྣོད་) refers to severing of attachment to the body and ego. It is a system which was believed to heal 424 different diseases. Machig's system of gcod, with its strong shamanic overtones, involves solitary meditation in areas held to be haunted by demons. The philosophical basis for the gcod is the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra, the teachings of which Machig was thoroughly immersed in since her childhood. However, the Zhibyed sect, founded by her, never became prominent because it attached more importance to mystic perfection and

83. Allione, n.55, pp.143-146.
84. Benard, n.64, p.48.
85. Samuel, n.69, p.477.
86. Allione, n.55, p.144.
meditation in isolation than to formal organization.  

Machig was the only female lama to found a major teaching lineage. She is reputed to have remarked that while the other Buddhist traditions came from India to Tibet, hers was the only one to have been exported from Tibet back to India. Legend has it that it was carried out under the protection of a goddess who is a form of Prajñāpāramitā, the female personification of insight.

The life story of Machig reveals the status of freedom which Tibetan women could enjoy as early as in the 11th and 12th centuries. In spite of family ties and social criticism, religious women in Tibet could behave unconventionally and succeed in securing a following of their own. However, various problems faced those wanting to have a family life and at the same time wishing to pursue a religious career. Machig Labdron had to suffer criticism for not respecting the monastic rule of celibacy, and she had to quit the place where she lived with her family and to move to an area where people were presumably less strict or more open-minded, according to one’s point of view.

Machig Labdron’s life exemplifies the transformation of obstacles into wisdom and virtue. She was involved in and overcame all the trappings of cyclic existence. First she relinquished her celibacy, married Topabhadra, and had children; she also encouraged her son to marry and have children. In Buddhism a householder’s life and its bonds are usually regarded as a distraction and an impediment to the religious life, since one’s efforts are directed to one’s spouse and children. Machig, her marriage, her children and her grandchildren were beneficial in her striving in the religious path. Her controversial marriage was interpreted as the Tantric method of uniting method and insight to achieve correct realization of ultimate reality; her lineage of Chö was perpetuated by her children

88. Samuel, n.69, p.478.
89. Lo Bue, n.65, p.486.
and grandchildren. She is best known as the great spiritual mother and to this day she continues to exert her precious presence through her teachings and is worshipped by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. 90

It is notable that the negative episodes in the life of Yeshe Tsogyel turned into dharmic events, promoting either her own practice, or the realization of her very tormentors. Her attempts to avoid conventional marriage proved futile. She received cruel treatment from her captors. However, she transformed this into her first lesson in basic dharma, concerning the pervasiveness of suffering and impermanence. She suffered within the limits of conventional marriage. Malicious forces attempted to restrain her from following the spiritual path by means of violence. Tsogyel reached an understanding of the proper connection between relationship and the practice of dharma by integrating spirituality and sexuality. However, the latter is quite incompatible with the status of a nun. But Tsogyel transformed sexuality into an element with the potential to liberate inner souls. We would notice unconventionality in Tsogyel’s role as a consort where she not only finds male companionship but also women companions. 91

Neither Nangsa, nor Machig Labdron, nor Yeshe Tsogyel was ready to enter family life, for such a conventional role of women denied their wish to pursue a religious career. None of them could preserve the monastic rule of celibacy. Their external appearances betrayed their spiritual longings. But again, none of them hesitated to leave their husbands in order to follow the call of their faith.

Only their difference lies in the method of attaining their respective goals. Nangsa reached her salvation through meditation in isolation. She relieved herself of the family bonds and attachment towards social life. Her achievement lies in her spiritual victory over the materialistic forces of malice and coercion.

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90. Benard, n.64, pp.50-51.
91. See n.77.
Machig Labdron realized the absolute truth after becoming a mother. However, at a later stage her meditation in desolate places helped her develop a new system of renunciation. Despite various difficulties in bringing up her children, she proved herself a good mother. Her children spread her teachings and continued her lineage. Machig Labdron made great contribution in developing the art of healing. Her group campaign for healing leprosy is noteworthy.

Yeshe Tsogyel attained her objective by inculcating a sense of repentence in the minds of her tormentors. She enlightened herself by developing her relationship through a non-possessive manner while being consort to her companions. Her sexual experience in a non-monogamous fashion gave her a new direction towards realizing impermanence and urged her to detach one’s soul from the physical body.

Vajravarāhi or Dorje Phagmo is traditionally depicted as a goddess with a small excrescence behind her ear in the shape of a pig’s head. She is also believed to have bristles on her back as a sign of true incarnation. She holds considerable spiritual and mystic sway over the Tibetan mind, and was often portrayed naked with vividly painted genitals. The symbolism of the pig or sow in connection with this goddess can be traced from the history of the sow in other cultures.

Pigs were Demeter’s fertility. They were called the uterine animals of the land, close to motherhood. ‘Pig’ in Greek and Latin was also ‘vagina’ and it was considered sacred. Dorje Phagmo could represent the incorporation of both the animal and the human, the ignorant and the logical, the dark and the light, the unconscious and conscious parts of

94. See n.81.
95. Allione, n.55, p.32.
96. Allione, n.55, p.31.
ourselves. In short, all these dualisms constitute the power of the goddess. 97

What Waddell had seen in the Samding monastery is what the imaginative Tibetans would like to term as supernatural manifestations and miraculous transformations of their venerated deities. 98

The legend that Jetsun Chonyid Dechen Tsomo, the fourth in the lineage of Dorje Phagmo took over the epidemic unto herself to save the people of Yamdok, corresponds much with the tale of Dpal-Idan lha-mo 99 who had taken unto herself the diseases of the world to save mankind.

3.5 CHINESE AND TIBETAN WOMENLORE: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Chinese, due to their pragmatic world view, put little emphasis on feminine divinities in womenlore. However, we find some stories of Guanyin who gave mankind the white rice and the red rice out of compassion or Xiwangmu who stole the bright pearl 100 that was created by the Dragon (yang) and the Phoenix (yin). In quite a few stories we find Guanyin as an embodiment of benevolence and mercy. Whereas, Xiwangmu has time and again figured as a predominantly evil force. But otherwise the Chinese womenlore is strongly dominated by the daughters of the earth. The themes are generally mundane except for some elements of supernaturalism at some particular juncture.

Since the Tibetans lay much faith on divinities, their womenlore remain saturated

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97. Allione, n.55, pp.31-32.
98. See n.81.
with miraculous events and magical feats of women who reached their goal through
spiritual attainment. Their extraordinary power to convince others of their faith made
them prominent among women of their times.

In Tibet the Rnying-ma-pa schools never wielded great political power. Probably
that is why they could afford to provide women with more opportunities to play an active
religious role than the rather male-oriented Bka'-gdams-pa, Sa-skya-pa and Dge-lugs-pa
orders. Buddhist teachings of Machig Labdron reflect a spirit of independence from
canonical orthodoxy, more so with the fact that her system of tantra was introduced from
Tibet to India. The Rnying-ma-pa school, that followed the Bonpo tradition, brought
about a creative phase in the cultural history of Tibet.101

The nature and degree of freedom women enjoyed vary in Chinese and Tibetan
societies. The respect and honour they received also vary, reflecting two different
cultures. In male-dominated societies how women found the right niche for themselves
needs to be examined by reviewing specific cases. In Chinese womenlore we would find
several feminine figures without names of their own. Even their surnames are not
mentioned in certain cases. Most of them were named after their professions, or after the
things they were good at making, or after the qualities which they possessed. Either the
story-tellers found it immaterial to mention the names of the feminine figures, or it might
be simply a reflection of the status of women in contemporary Chinese society.

The tremendous embarrassment and humiliation which Mulan had to face, amply
shows how women were viewed through the looking glasses of male chauvinism. Once
her feet got exposed, she no longer remained an accomplished, gallant warrior. She was
reduced to nothing more than a "frail" woman in the eyes of her soldiers. The eyes which
were full of reverence and admiration for Mulan, later gaped at her with silent mockery.
The true image of a feudal society stands naked before our eyes. Mulan's misfortune was
a representative of the sufferings of women crippled by foot-binding, a system invented by

101. See n. 89.
Almost all the stories narrated under Chinese womenlore are testimony to the tragic experiences of women subjected to misery of one form or the other. Many were exploited both physically and mentally by landlords and kings. The story of Bai Mao Nü (White Haired Girl), which turned into a legend after the Anti-Japanese War (1937-45), depicts her sorrows in the hands of the landlord, Huang Shiren. The story further narrates her escape to freedom that left her in cold and hunger. Figures like Meng Jiang Nü and Dong Xiaoyuan chose to commit suicide than to succumb to the emperors’ lust. Feudal ethics created obstacles for many. Zhu Yingtai, being unable to unite with Liang Shanbo in her worldly life, met him in the world of death, thus signalling the victory of her love. But Zhinü was not in a position to revolt against the coercive attitude of her grandmother—Wangmu Niangniang, although she silently expressed her disregard for the celestial rules that barred union with earthlings. Liu Lanzhi fell prey to the baseless allegations of her mother-in-law, and chose to die in the face of her brother’s profit-making deals.

The beauties from history were virtually the pleasure-making tools in the hands of various emperors. They were more vulnerable to the carnal desires of the despot than any other category of women. This is common with the cases of Nangsa and Tsogyel whose unusual beauty stood in the way of their religious pursuit. The difference between the two sets of beauties, Chinese and Tibetan, lies in the fact that in the Tibetan case women like Nangsa succeeded in liberating themselves from family bonds and other worldly attachments because they found certain spiritual objectives to pursue. Whereas in the Chinese case, freedom was practically impossible because firstly, seeing from the set-up of ancient Chinese cities, heavily fortified and surrounded by moats, escape was physically improbable. Secondly, the beauties under discussion had no strong desire to follow a religious path. From the Tibetan point of view, such longings could have provided them with answers to various contradictions which they faced in their worldly but
unproductive existence. Although glowing with beauty, Nangsa and Tsogyel made the practice of dharma their ultimate goal. Unlike most of the Chinese beauties, they never sought to live a luxurious life. The greatness of Tibetan women lay in their renunciation of material wealth, and practice of meditation for the well-being of all sentient beings.

The mother of Lu Ban became noteworthy after making umbrella and giving the saw a new shape. Enhancing the utility of a saw or saving people from sun and rain by devising a tool were clearly two things that advanced material civilization of mankind. The mothers of Mencius and Xu Xiake made their sons men of fame by giving them proper guidance and encouragement. But none of the three mothers came down to us except for in the form of mere surnames. They were not like Machig Labdron who earned fame herself and passed on her teachings through her children to the coming generations. Machig’s accomplishment as a mother lay in bringing up a son who had turned insane, and also in coping up with another trouble child, a petty thief. She not only managed to cure their ills, but also succeeded in propagating her healing techniques in the face of many scornful remarks. She proved that celibacy was not the only way to reach one’s spiritual goal. This was clearly a departure from the conventional notion of attaining Buddhahood.

The breaking of convention can be observed also in Chinese womenlore but with variation in nature. Mulan went to the battlefield and Zhu Yingtai went for higher education. Both schools and military expedition were unusual places for women. So both had to disguise themselves as men before going ahead. Zhinü, herself a celestial figure, broke the convention by marrying a human being.

A woman generally longs to enter into a relationship usually with man. She wants to depend upon a person who can give her some moral support, spiritual strength and also to a certain extent material benefit. But when she loses all these, she suffers from a sense of insecurity and depression. However, that did not happen with Nangsa. She found refuge in her pursuit for spiritual enlightenment in a monastery. Nangsa lacked no courage after being forsaken even by her mother. Yeshe Tsogyel did not feel dejected after being virtually forsaken by her parents and then flogged and sexually assaulted by
robbers. She made it into a spiritual lesson for herself.

The type of courage the personages in Chinese stories demonstrate, is of a different nature. Baisha Guniang or Liu Hulan, none hesitated to sacrifice their lives for a just cause. Baihua Gongzhu or Mulan fought gallantly at the head of their troops, bringing the enemies to their knees. This courage again varied from the individual heroism demonstrated by Huashan, Baisha Guniang or Liu Hulan. Qiao Gu, Xiu Niang and Chagu all had the sense of justice and courage to stand out against the tyranny of landlords and petty officials. The filial daughter-in-law had the moral strength and courage to jump from the cliff. Wang Zhaojun braved the horrid weather of the north and went to an alien land to live there with the Huns. The characters symbolizing sincere love and oppressed under the feudal system, were all courageous in their own merits. All these cases project courage of variant shades.

It is remarkable that in Tibet no other stories of women were considered worth mentioning except the ones that spoke of enlightenment in Buddhist teachings. The Chinese stories are mostly this-worldly and hence illustrate love for human society. They also demonstrate that human concern for one another is the key to social, cultural and moral upliftment of mankind. The Tibetan stories try to inculcate that very consciousness by means of transcendentalism, spiritualism and esoteric practices in tantric meditation. Divinities like Tára and dakini, themselves a part of feminity, were used as givers of dreams with the purpose of convincing people of the supernaturalism and significance of particular events. The ultimate goal was to make the people follow the faith. Since the Chinese do not have much faith in the supernatural, nor do they have any intent or scope to change one's faith, they do not indulge in talks of gods and spirits. Among the stories narrated, the only exception is the story of the filial daughter-in-law. This story has an element of supernaturalism. But such a story is considered highly superstitious even by Chinese folklorists, who are not supposed to bring the question of rationality and logic

102. Cf. n.21, pp.231-236.
In the realm of folk literature where fantasy has a major role to play.

In the process of our discussion, we come across quite a few negative characters among the feminity in womenlore. The imperial affluence of Yang Gui Fei made her arrogant and despotic in nature. She did not feel hesitant to resort to violent treachery. She was perhaps the worst of all the beauties because of her murderous scheme. The conspiracy of Baosi against the queen of Zhou Youwang with the aim of making her son Bofu the crown prince, made her known as a wily fox with sinister motives. Secondly, her role in bringing the downfall of the kingdom by losing the trust of the dukes was apparently an unconscious act of deception, though an act of ensnaring the king can hardly be ruled out. The queen of the State of Yue was another negative character in Chinese history. Her jealousy against beautiful ladies of her times reminds us of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong and a member of the Gang of Four, who brought disaster to China in the recent times. The queen of Yue crusaded against Xishi and many other beauties of her time. So did Jiang Qing who felt jealous especially of the intellectuals and theatre personages because she herself was an actress. The queen of Yue was worried that she might get overshadowed by the beauties around her.

Wangmu Niangniang is a divinity well known for her ill repute. Her atrocious behaviour against Zhinü and many others earned her a bad name. In the folktales of Hangzhou, she is said to have stolen the bright pearl which took several years in its making by the Dragon and the Phoenix. She denied to return their fruit of labour and in the ensuing tussle the pearl fell to the earth—creating the West Lake of Hangzhou.103 The mother of Mulan acted in a negative manner by virtually sending her daughter to meet an unfortunate death.

We have discussed the kind of jealousy the queen of Yue suffered from. The jealousy of Ani Nyemo was of a different sort. She lived in a male-dominated society, leading a life of a spinster under her father and brother's rule. Ani's individualism and

103. See n.100.
egoism took an ugly turn after Nangsa's arrival in the Rinang lord's family. She suffered from inferiority complex when the household responsibility was handed over to Nangsa. Ani sought to curry favour with her brother, the king, by defaming her sister-in-law. By passing malicious remarks against Nangsa, an attempt was made by Ani to regain her lost importance.

Emperor Shunzhi's queen and mother took the opportunity of Shunzhi's absence from Lanxingong, and resorted to treachery by compelling Dong Xiaoyuan to take her own life. Thus the death of Dong Xiaoyuan was legally a case of suicide and not murder as was calculated by the two conspirators. Death was also forced upon Liu Lanzhi. And the person responsible for her misfortune was her mother-in-law. In the story of "The Precious Bowl", the daughter-in-law played a negative role.

The attitude of Nangsa's mother was both negative and positive. She refused to give shelter to Nangsa. This was her negative approach. But this proved to be positive when Nangsa went to the monastery to become a nun. Yeshe Tsogyel's life was also chalked out in an almost similar manner.

In analysing the details of Chinese and Tibetan womenlore, we find that women in both these oriental cultures were subjected to extreme humiliation or even put to death. The responsibility for such misery lay not only in the hands of men, fifty per cent of it actually lay in the hands of women themselves. Women under patriarchy became much more oppressive towards their own kind than men.

The Chinese feminity were painted more or less with a brush of realism. Supernaturalism took a back seat. The Tibetan feminity were portrayed with a supramundane colour, and with a heavy tinge of tantra and magic. The Chinese stories are easily comprehensible because of their down-to-earth nature. They are concrete and rather objective. The Tibetan stories are full of abstract ideas, generally beyond a common man's understanding. They are spiritual and therefore, highly subjective.