Classroom teachers who take up the topic of women and gender in pre-modern China face a familiar set of problems. Although many excellent English language studies of women in Ming-Qing China have been published in the last two decades, most sources available to their feminist authors were the work of Chinese men. Whether it is family memorabilia, informal essays and fiction, or didactic texts emphasizing moral virtues and exemplary conduct, the record is dominated by the voices of literati males; and even writings by women authors themselves reached the public only through the filter of the male kin who circulated and published them. This cannot escape notice in the classroom, and today’s students quickly assume that the “traditional Chinese woman” was simply a victim of patriarchal oppression. Foot-binding still serves as a symbol of that oppression, certain to provoke horrified questions from the class, and to reinforce a general assumption that modern Westernized women have long been emancipated from the sorts of male domination Confucian norms imposed. Such readers believe too easily that all enlightenment came to China from the West, and as a corollary, that traditional women had nothing in common with modern women.
Lisa See has written two historical novels that follow the best feminist scholarship on women in the Ming-Qing period by tackling these stereotypes. In Snowflower and the Secret Fan and in Peony In Love, she asks readers to imagine how a few such women might have found voices of their own within, rather than in opposition to, the Confucian social order, and how they found ways to self-fulfillment without flouting their culture's fundamental values. To accomplish this task, she created two heroines who spent most of their days in the sex-segregated domestic “inner quarters” of their homes. Nevertheless, these heroines will stretch the contemporary reader’s imagination: they are a ghost and widowed matriarch.

Both of these unlikely protagonists have some literary education and express themselves in writing, connecting their stories to the historical issues surrounding the gradual spread of female literacy in China in the late imperial era. The last century of Ming rule, from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, was a time of both weak government and of economic development, fostering social instability and cultural innovation. Printing costs were falling and commercial networks were expanding so that printed books, long available for elite consumption and classical scholarship, spread into vernacular and entertainment markets on an unprecedented scale. In this context, female literacy could become both a status symbol for gentry families and an avenue for “female talent” to express itself. It both encouraged mothers in scholarly households to serve as educators, and offered some women opportunity for more socially risky public recognition, mostly as poets.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, controversies among elite moralists were less about whether girls should be educated, and more about the purposes that education should serve. Some husbands and fathers wanted women’s learning, like the women themselves, to remain sequestered in the household. Others, more liberal, supported social mingling between the sexes. In this context, a libertarian connoisseur of “female talent” could easily pass for a libertine, and the fact that young women poets could be eroticized as sisters to the courtesan fueled both fascination and censure. These crosscurrents are essential to understanding the increasing volume of literary output by women that survives to the present—output that offers rare access to a verifiable female voice.

Challenged to portray women’s lives in Ming-Qing Confucian society and determined to imagine a woman’s own account of such a social world, Lisa See has drawn upon two very different genres of female-authored texts to inspire her stories.
In Love

In sum, Peony In Love is in fact a very learned novel, and readers without much cultural background may find it difficult to read just for the story, which can seem extravagant and artificial to a novice, about women who have emotionally intense out-of-body experiences that do not connect to familiar social relationships. Peony can meet her dead mother and grandmother as a ghost in the afterworld, and learn their stories of Chinese female suffering during the wars of the Manchu conquest. She also can haunt a temple dedicated to a dead poetess, and overhear the conversations of members of a female poetry society who go there on an excursion. These inventive narrative devices allow See to do some compelling storytelling based upon historical records that show important aspects of seventeenth-century women’s lives that took place outside the home. But while Peony, the free-wheeling ghost, is passionately portrayed, Peony’s mortal lover, the scholar Wu Wushan, never really comes alive on the page. This makes it harder for readers to imagine one of the main issues inspiring the cult of qing—the desire for romantic love within Confucian marriage. In the end, then, Peony In Love may be more successful at communicating the connections between women’s aspirations and literature than in capturing the emotional lives of women and men who dreamed of such unions.

By contrast, Snowflower and the Secret Fan, which was written earlier and reached the New York Times bestseller list, is closer to a conventional historical narrative. As an old woman, the protagonist, Lily, recalls her life history. Growing up as a prosperous farmer’s daughter, her early days were spent with her extended family of kinswomen in the big upstairs chamber where all worked and passed the time, and where she prepared for her arranged marriage. To prepare for a desirable match required the bodily discipline of foot binding as proof of gentle rearing and sexual attractiveness, and the skilled labor of needlework to produce the embroidered shoes, clothing, and quilts that constituted a bride’s dowry. The reader follows Lily through life cycle events marked by ritual ceremonies and domestic duties, from a girl’s ‘hair pinning’ celebration to betrothal, marriage, and motherhood, to the days of “rice and salt” filled with a housewife’s round of tasks, and with the precautions and religious observances marking pregnancy, childbirth, and...
infancy. Given that death struck both young and old in nineteenth-century China, the cycle of Lily's life was also punctuated by funerals and mournings, not only for parents and grandparents, but also for young age mates and children.

All of this is woven into the story, supported not only by Lisa See's scholarly research, but also by her easy familiarity with the world of her own Chinese grandmother and other female relatives in Los Angeles, and her visits to Jiangyong County, Hunan, home to the last surviving Chinese women proficient in writing "nu shu." Her heroine, Lily, tries to be a proper woman according to the precepts of village society. She enjoys what Chinese call a "good fate"—marrying well, bearing healthy sons, and living to be respected as Lady Lu, wife of a well-to-do farmer, merchant, and community leader, and mother of a son who becomes a successful degree holder.

What makes her life material for storytelling are the unusual female social customs surrounding "nu shu" script in Jiangyong and a few neighboring counties in rural Hunan. As researched by anthropologists, the exchange of poems and letters between women in "nu shu" may have been one of many local manifestations of minority-inflected gender practices found throughout Chinese southern and southwestern highlands. But "nu shu" was not obviously identified as minority in origin, and supported highly structured friendships that encouraged romantic intimacy between "sworn sisters" analogous to culturally-approved visions of marriage. The script was used to write down some of the songs women sang on significant ritual occasions, and in the exchange of highly stylized, yet deeply felt, letters and poems in which young women affirmed their lifelong devotion and fidelity to one another. Unlike the products of elite "female talent" of the urban elite discussed in Peony, this form of female literacy was ignored by the larger society and attracted no public circulation; its texts were often buried or burned with the writer, and only a few twentieth-century samples survive.

See has used the theme of "nu shu" to create a women's rural world parallel to, but not actively at odds with, the presumed normative Confucian social order. Unlike Peony, Snowflower is about endurance, acceptance, and survival, not about protest or rebellion, even ghostly. An intimate friendship is at the emotional center of two women's social worlds, which brings them their deepest love and helps them cope with the burdens of their family lives. It is a friendship marked by secrets, not only the "secret" writing system which excludes males, but the personal secrets Snowflower keeps and Lily allows to stay hidden, until their intimacy is worn away by years of things unsaid. It is also a story of women and social class, as Lily's marriage raises her up in society, while Snowflower's pulls her down. Readers are presented with subtle character studies of two women who take different paths to satisfy their desires for love and their drives for social acceptance, and will want to reflect carefully on whether Lily's retelling of her life story is an act of atonement.

Historical novels succeed as entertainment by creating appealing characters who are psychologically accessible to today's readers. Inevitably, the first person narrative voices of these two heroines, Peony and Lily, may sound quite modern to scholars and teachers—they are comfortable with personal detail, frank if discrete about sexual matters, even explicit about the pain of foot binding (a topic about which the historical record is thunderously silent). Overall, they speak their private thoughts uninhibited by the traditional virtue of "sincerity"; where, as Confucius taught, the goal is "to follow one's heart's desire without transgressing what is right." But this makes them plausible as heroines who can help suggest some universal truths that pre-modern women share with women today. A reader may be reminded of today's preoccupations with anorexia (Peony) and with lesbianism (Lily and Snowflower). But a thoughtful feminist reading could also lead to reflection on how women today continue to accommodate male privilege in their pursuit of love and their desire for social position. And in the sphere where historical novels can shine—creating a setting scrupulously faithful to what can be known about a past time and place—both novels are exemplary.

NOTES


