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女诫 Lessons for Women

Bridget E. Nicholas
University of Kentucky

Notes:

Bridget Nicholas won the first place in the Humanities: Creative category.

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Abstract: *Lessons for Women*

This work plays with cultural and conceptual juxtaposition through examining personal experiences in China and Taiwan as they relate to gender and sexuality. The poems are arranged to correspond to the sections of Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women*, a Han dynasty Chinese work that articulated conduct for women in relation to their husbands, with the addition of a new "lesson" of my own creation. This structure aims to enhance the tension between the feminine virtues expressed in the headings—values deemed important to women within a Confucian society by an ancient Chinese female thinker—and the values reflected in the experiences of a contemporary American woman in China and Taiwan. This structure is intended to complicate rather than streamline the concepts explored: this piece rejects the notion of a clear binary between traditional/modern, Chinese/American, feminine/masculine, and instead strives to cultivate inconsistency. In her analysis of women's autobiographies, Sidonie Smith argues that female autobiographers are inseparable from their cultural and historical context and that "the woman who would write autobiography must uphold her reputation for female goodness or risk her immortal reputation." This piece plays with this idea of "female goodness" and ultimately eschews it, presenting the self as an ambiguous character. Additionally, this work examines the dichotomy between the true self and the seen self. There are two "I's in this piece: the seen self, reflecting the self perceived by others as "foreign woman" (I), and the true self (i). As the subject-as-narrator and subject-as-self intersect and trade narration within a poem, the gap between them becomes more apparent. Taken as a whole, this piece culminates in the essential lesson for women: expectations of gender and sexuality are transient, and womanhood is ultimately a slippery and malleable concept.

女诫 *Lessons for Women*

I felt China as a kiss

串 (*Chuanr*) tingling against my mouth,
tongues of polluted Beijing air scraping my throat,
the lascivious red of strawberries

(Overpriced for laowai at the local market)

wet against my lips,
so ripe
that there's an edge
of decay.

I. 卑弱 Humbleness

Masculinity

(As constructed through investigation of a Chinese dating app)

One picture of abs, three of food

我会给你做好吃的

I can cook you delicious things

Two pictures of cars, another of shoes

Turtleneck, abs, random white guy with a guitar

#Loneliness is the carnival of the single

#thewomanisalwaysright #quiet #likessimple

Femininity

(As constructed through comments by passers-by, taxi drivers, landlady)

You drink beer? You're so manly.

You really are a little girl.

Western women look better in qipaos . . . they have more curves.

No, you would have to get a qipao tailored—your hips are too big.

Chinese women wouldn't show as much leg as you do.

You're so pale.

You're so pale.

You're so pale. I'm so dark.

Western women sweat a lot more than Chinese women.

You have a good nose.

You're beautiful.

Are you married?

Is that your boyfriend?

You're going out?

You're going out again?

II. 敬慎 Respect and Caution

Respect

your body is like a Renaissance painting,
 you say, and take my hand to trace
 the curve from waist to hip to thigh
 your fingers trace the way the shadows divide my body
chiaroscuro

like la Grande Odalisque, I meet your eye, art connoisseur
 owning my nakedness
 and flee my frame

Caution

body fuzzy with beer and camaraderie,
 i leaned closer
 with every word
 til we were pressed together at shoulder and thigh
 two warm intersections
 and i wanted you to kiss me
 but instead you said
 that's a huge-ass cockroach
 and it wasn't a metaphor
 and i was deflowered only by mosquitoes
 who pressed their lustful mouths to my waist,
 leaving pearlescent love bites

III. 行 Womanly Qualifications

妇德 Womanly Virtue

are her eyes natural?
 the cashier at the

knock-off KFC
 asked the girl in front of me,
 and i wanted to say
 NO
 in an alien voice
 and pluck my eyeballs
 from their sockets
 and dangle them in front of her
 but that would be rude
 and painful

妇言 **Womanly Speech**

apparently my nose is Russian
 and my hair
 and my paleness
 and my not-Chinesenesss
 i have a pun i would make
 every time someone asked if I was Russian
 if I could speak English
 but I can't
 so it just rattles in my brain

妇容 **Womanly Bearing**

irises' purple tongues loll at me
 as I walk to class
 and i hear echoes of the men's voices
 i heard last Saturday:

那个美女真美!

That girl is really pretty!

With nothing awry in the words,
only in the prickle of their eyes on my body
and the flinty secret of my comprehension

妇功 **Woman's Work**

waiguoren! said the old woman

and I turned

and she said, you heard!

I said, I did!

and she clapped me on the shoulder

to see whether I existed

and she kept patting me

and I kept existing

IV. ☒心 **Whole-Hearted Devotion**

When you ask

你有微信吗?

Do you have a WeChat?

i become a scientific marvel

i peel back layers of technological progress,

regressing into semi-neolithic womanhood

as I wallpaper myself with excuses:

i don't have a WeChat

i don't have a Chinese number i can't download WeChat

i don't have data i don't have a phone i don't have email either

i don't use technology i don't live around here i don't remember my address actually

the longer you talk to me

the more ridiculous I become.

你有微信吗？

yelled at me by a cluster of teenage boys

on rented bicycles

whispered to me by the middle-aged man

who sidled up to me in the cafeteria

mumbled into my ear by the man who tossed an arm

around me in the club

Can you teach me English?

i don't even know English thanks

Can I be your friend?

i have enough friends already thanks

Can I see you again?

i am leaving China right now actually thanks

i do not know a good Chinese word for no

V. 曲从 Implicit Obedience

(In response to my landlady's directive to "Please not wash undergarments in the washing machine")

i like to imagine what sort of nefarious plans

my panties have in mind

that allows them such a position of terror in my landlady's consciousness.

Would the evil sexy lady-germs seduce the honest other-clothes-germs?

I agree wholeheartedly with keeping the washing machine chaste

but what about the hapless pans?

The floor?

The tiny baby chair?

What if they too become infected and grow yonic maws?
 I baptize my clump of sin-garments in cloudy Chinese tap water
 under the cat's unblinking gaze
 as i fantasize about telling my landlady
 about the children undoubtedly conceived
 through the unholy convergence of sex germs
 in the cesspits
 that are dorm washing machines.

VI. A New Lesson For the Modern Woman: 毅力 Tenacity

Sometimes i hate this place
 as I wander campus searching for benches
 that don't exist
 because no one wants to slow down
 and men yell uncreative but unmalicious things
 at me from car windows
 Meinu! Waiguo nuhair!
 Pretty girl! Foreign girl!
 I am a curiosity.
 Most days it is fine but
 some days i want to scream
 I UNDERSTAND YOU
 and sometimes droves of young men
 in "bew nalance" shirts
 eye me as I eat my vegetable rice
 not because I am attractive but
 because I am other.
 And sometimes I read and I recite

juggling syllables like tapioca bubbles on my tongue
until one slips
straight down my throat
and I choke

And i don't want to say it again
And i don't want to say it again,
but slower and better and righter

But
sometimes shirtless men play guitar in a tiny glass-front store
and chubby-faced babies blow kisses
and cats with fluffy faces and shaved bodies lurk in coffee shops
and a taxi driver hands me his phone
to talk to his girlfriend who is not a girlfriend
and Korean schoolchildren in orange ballcaps
scream with delight when I say Kentucky
KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN

And i remember how i love
the beautiful madness that is China