PRESS RELEASE

女 *Chinese Women*

16 April – 20 July 2025

The exhibition 女 Chinese Women delves into various aspects of the lives of women in Chinese culture, evoking through a selection of poems written by women the tensions inherent in their status. The visit begins with a presentation of their traditional depiction in art, from the evolution of beauty standards embodied by funerary figurines of the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the hieratic portrait of an elderly lady of the Qing (1644-1911), an anonymous witness to ancestor worship in China. Beyond the country's borders, a certain image of the Chinese woman reached Europe through export porcelain, and spread there as an idealised model in the Chinoiserie of Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and François Boucher (1703-1770).

The second section is centred on a magnificent wedding bed of carved and gilded wood, symbolising that crucial moment in a person's life represented by marriage. In a centuries-old patriarchal society, numerous decorative motifs relate to marital bliss, fertility, and the desire for male offspring. The importance of marriage, whether experienced as an obligation or as a happy union, is widely echoed in literature, notably through the well-known classic *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), frequently illustrated on ceramics.

A third section explores women's ornaments and attire, but also deals with the painful practice of foot binding, a form of mutilation considered a status symbol and a mark of feminine beauty. The fourth part is dedicated to female deities who provide special protection to women and children, as well as popular beliefs related to childbirth. The exhibition closes with the works of several women painters from the Ming period (1368-1644) to the present day. Dong Xiaowan 董小宛 (1625-1651), the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908), Ling Shuhua 凌書華 (1900-1990), as well as the artist Peng Wei 彭薇 (born in 1974), each tell, in their own manner, a tale about the status of women in China.

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Canons of beauty and women's fashion in the Tang period

Tang funerary ceramics (618-907) tell us much about the evolution of beauty standards and feminine fashion among the aristocracy. This is illustrated by several terracotta figurines, known as mingqi (明器), intended to accompany the deceased in the tomb. Most of them are decorated with a polychrome lead glaze known as "three colors", sancai 三彩. The elongated statuette with an eggshell glaze is representative of the early Tang: a slender figure wearing a dress tightened under the arms, with wide sleeves that completely cover the hands.

Over time, the female silhouette evolved towards ever more voluptuous forms. By the middle of the 8th century, fashions were changing as women of this period showed rounder curves and wore loose-fitting clothes. The evolution of the female canon at this time has sometimes been attributed to the influence of Tang Xuanzong's 玄宗 (r. 712-756) favorite concubine, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-756).

During the reign of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705), the only woman to have ruled China as empress, polo developed as a fashionable sport among the aristocracy. Women rode horses, sometimes dressed in men's or foreign clothing.

The Chinese Woman of Dreams: Europe and Chinoiserie

In the 18th century, porcelain and other goods exported from China by the East India Companies inspired a decorative vocabulary in Europe tinged with exoticism and known as "chinoiserie." In this context, a largely fantasized imagery of the Chinese woman emerged.

The painter Antoine Watteau distinguished himself in this field through the creation of his series of engravings, *Diverses figures chinoises*, includes several representations of Chinese women drawn with little concern for truthfulness, with captions which owe much to the documents collected by the Jesuits then present in China.

At a time when Chinese porcelain was gaining in popularity, orders were placed for designs that were to be applied to entire services made in China but tailored to European taste and customs.

In the Netherlands, the designer Cornelis Pronk (1691-1759) was commissioned by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to create chinoiserie designs to be reproduced on porcelain from China.

The first such design, known as the "Ladies with Parasols," shows two women standing side by side, one holding a parasol while the other leans towards a group of ducks. The large plate with a green ground shows two women under an arbour, one holding a flower. This was the fourth design produced by Pronk in 1737 and sent to Canton in 1739.

Marriage and wedded bliss

Marriage in traditional Chinese Confucian society was a union between two families, arranged through a gobetween, and concluded after matching of the fiancés' horoscopes and the payment of a dowry by the woman's parents. On the wedding day, the new bride left her own family to move into her husband's household, where she might find herself under her motherin- law's domination. The birth of a son would ensure a respectable position for her within her new family.

The rigid framework within which marriages took place gave rise to many love stories in literature, some of them tragic, others happy, and some even transgressive.
One of the most famous is the *Romance of the Western Pavilion* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), frequently illustrated on porcelain, which tells of the attempts by a young scholar to win the hand of his sweetheart, abducted by bandits. References to other well-known romances include representations of pairs of butterflies, an allusion to the tragic love of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, separated by their families and who were only reunited after death in the shape of two inseparable butterflies.

A rich iconography is at hand to express wishes for marital harmony and the birth of many sons. These hopes can be conveyed by characters, the most common of which is *shuangxi* 囍 or "Double Happiness", formed by the combination of two characters *xi* 喜 denoting happiness. Marital bliss is frequently illustrated by pairs of mandarin ducks, which are said to mate for life. Other associations are made through the use of homophones, a common device in Chinese decorative arts. Thus, the sound *he*, meaning "harmony" or "togetherness", can be represented by objects, plants, or animals whose name is also pronounced *he*, for example boxes 盒 or lotuses 荷. A scene illustrating a lotus in a box thus refers to a "harmonious union" (*hehe* 和合). Similarly, fruit characterized by an abundant production of seeds – such as lotus, pomegranates, melons, and grapes – may express the desire for numerous male offspring through homophony between the word "son" *zi* 子 and "seed", *zi* 子.

Females goddesses and divinities

A number of female figures inhabit the vast pantheon of Chinese popular beliefs, many of whom bestow particular protection on women and children. Called *miaoxian* 妙仙, "Immortals with efficacious powers", they were shamans, healers, or midwives, often represented as statuettes placed on the home altar or as woodcut prints intended to be pasted on the wall. Many focused their powers on specific dangers, such as preventing or healing illnesses, or assisting during those high-risk moments in a woman's life that are pregnancy and childbirth.

In order to ensure the birth of a child, would-be mothers could also turn to a prominent member of the Buddhist pantheon, Guanyin 觀音, the Chinese name of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and more specifically to a form known as Songzi Guanyin 送子觀音, "Guanyin grantor of children". Though the Bodhisattva is essentially a masculine figure, in some cases he acquires a feminine guise in China, or is understood as such by his devout followers. A quintessential "mother and child" figure, Songzi Guanyin is represented accompanied by boys, and is often shown in an ambivalent form, at times more masculine and at times more feminine.

Another major female divinity is Xiwangmu 西王母, the "Queen Mother of the West", whose origins can be traced back to the earliest periods of Chinese history. Dwelling in her palace on Mount Kunlun, Xiwangmu is held to be the queen of the Immortals, and is known as a dispenser of prosperity, longevity, and eternal bliss. She is frequently represented in a paradise setting, surrounded by goddesses, female servants, and musicians. Her companions, the Immortals (*xian* 仙), are frequently illustrated in Chinese arts, both in painting and in the decorative arts, accompanied by symbols of longevity such as phoenixes, cranes, or pine trees.

Women painters

Celebrated from a young age for her great beauty, **Dong Xiaowan** lived as a courtesan in Nanking and Suzhou until she met the scholar and essayist Mao Xiang 冒襄 (1611-1693) at the age of seventeen. With financial help from a friend, the latter bought the young woman's freedom and took as his concubine. Dong Xiaowan fitted perfectly into her new role in Mao Xiang's household, respectfully and humbly serving the wife and mother of her husband. Well-educated and artistically inclined, she proved to be an ideal companion for the scholar, assisting him in his work while he encouraged her own pursuit of calligraphy and painting. During the unrest of the 1640s that marked the fall of the Ming and the rise of the Qing dynasty, the couple were forced to flee their residence in Beijing and seek refuge in the south, abandoning a large part of their possessions, including many of Dong Xiaowan's works. In a moving memoir written after the young woman's death, Reminiscences of the Plum-shaded Convent (Yingmei an yiyu 影梅庵憶語), Mao Xiang recounts the short and tragic life of this devoted wife, a true celebration of marital love.
Dong Xiaowan died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-six.

Ling Shuhua (1900-1990) was born in Beijing into the family of a high-ranking Qing official. Although her mother had entered the household as a fourth concubine, her reform-minded father permitted his daughters to attend a school for girls, go to university, and marry for love. In 1926, after graduating from Yanjing University where she studied foreign literature, she married the publisher Chen Yuan 陳源 (1896-1970). Nowadays, Ling Shuhua is mainly remembered for her short stories and novels of the 1920s and 1930s, describing with much sensitivity the suffering of women in traditional Chinese society. Ling Shuhua belonged to the avant-garde literary group Crescent Moon Society (Xinyue she 新月社) that met in Beijing between 1923 and 1931. She was also in contact with the British author Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), of the Bloomsbury Circle, with whom she corresponded regularly. In 1946, she followed her husband to Europe when he was appointed China’s representative to UNESCO, splitting her time between London and Paris. In addition to her literary career, however, Ling Shuhua was also a talented calligrapher and painter. Among her teachers was Miao Jiahui 繆嘉惠 (1842-1918), a gifted female painter who had served as instructor and “ghost painter” to the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908) and ran a painting school in Beijing after the fall of the imperial family. Her small and intimate paintings follow the tradition of Chinese landscape ink painting, though she frequently drew inspiration from her travels. She held several exhibitions of her works in Europe and the United States, notably at the musée Cernuschi in Paris in 1962.

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Dates	16 April – 20 July 2025
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art Rue Munier-Romilly 8 1206 Genève – Suisse +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2 pm to 6 pm, until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full CHF 15.- Unemployed, disabled people and students CHF 10.-
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Cultural Mediation	Marie Wyss, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits	at 6.30 pm Thursday 8 May Wednesdays 23 April, 21 May, 4 & 18 June, 2 & 16 July 2025
Private guided visits	Reservation required mediation@fondationbaur.ch

All cultural activities (lectures, guided tours and creative workshops) at
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