

Construction of Womanhood in Confucian Texts for Girls

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Abstract

An investigation in the construction of womanhood in Confucian texts is important to our understanding of the cry for social and economic equality for women in the twentieth century, yet little has been done to analyse the didactic nature of these texts. In pre-modern China, women were expected to demonstrate obedience to male members of the family at every stage of life. As children, girls were required to obey their fathers; as wives, women were required to obey their husbands; and as widows, women were required to obey their adult sons. At no point in her life, according to the Confucian view, was a woman expected to function as an autonomous being, free of male control. This study examines major Confucian texts for girls in order to shed light on their nature of the repressive social hierarchy dominated by males.

Key words: Confucianism; Moral education; Chastity; Filial piety; Gender

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of Confucianism were heavily based on ancient cosmology, derived from the early agricultural practices along the Yellow River valley. This ancient cosmology is itself characterised by a deep belief that the world is the product of two interacting, complementary

elements: *yin* and *yang*. All things female, dark, weak, and passive are attributable to *yin*, whereas *yang* is characteristically male, bright, strong and active. Whilst the attribution of both male and female are necessary and complement one another, *yin*, by nature, is said to be passive to *yang*. Based on this belief, Confucians constructed an ideology that lead indoctrinated followers to believe that the harmony of society depended upon a hierarchical structure that reflected human relationships that were naturally constructed with superior and inferior statuses. Consequently, Confucian moralists regulated the ethical requirements for girls and women. In an ideal Confucian home, women were expected to demonstrate obedience to their male members of the family at every stage of life. Young girls were required to obey their fathers; wives were required to obey their husbands; and widows were required to obey their adult sons. At no point in her life, based on Confucian values, was a woman expected to be free of male control. Indeed, in dynastic China's patriarchal and polygamous society, men had multiple wives and concubines, but women were not allowed to see any other men, apart from their close relatives, husbands or masters. This paper argues that these Confucian texts essentially embodied the ideological foundation of the subordination of women, rationalising females' acquiescence in their own inferiority and domestic seclusion. This paper further argues that these texts also made note of another foundation of Confucian ethics for women: reducing women to a state of economic reliance, physical compliance and sexual subjection.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the West, study of Chinese women has mainly focused on their social roles, concentrating in the areas of marriage practice, feminism, family planning, women and productive labour, and women and revolution. Understanding of women's status in dynastic China has

been largely oversimplified and narrowly based on the perception of the prejudice against women originated from Confucian ethics governing human superior-inferior relationships. Because education was a privilege for male children, the reading list for girls was much shorter than that prescribed for boys, hence the inadequacy of data for systematic analysis. For all the importance and significance of this research topic, there has been a huge blank space in serious study of the construction of womanhood in the Confucian texts for girls. This paper attempts to shed light on the repressive nature of these texts.

2. THE CLASSIC FOR GIRLS

The *Classic for Girls* (*Nüer jing*), being the most elementary text, is comprehensive and covers all the essential elements of the moral requirements for girls. It was written by an unknown author in the Ming dynasty (1368-644). The aim of the book, according to Confucian moral standards, was to prepare a girl to be a “dutiful wife and fine mother” (*xianqi liangmu*). From the first two lines of the text, it is clear that the text was intended to be listened to, acknowledging the limited reading abilities of its young audience. Strictly speaking, it was therefore a kind of listening material:

The *Classic for Girls* is about the rules,
Which girls should carefully listen to.¹

For the same reason, the text was written in very simple language and did not use many historical allusions, which often appear in texts for boys. Another characteristic of the text is its focus on the trivial details of life. The values it advocates are diligence, quietness, proper composure, filial piety, respect for elders, thrift and saving, chastity, thrice obeying (to father, husband and son in widowhood) and four virtues (fidelity, physical appearance, propriety in speech and efficiency in needlework), and proper role model for the young.

Diligence:

Get up early in the morning, and tie up your hair with an old handkerchief;
then, without delay, go and sweep the front courtyard of the inner chamber.
Cleanliness, both inside and outside, always makes parents happy.
After combing your hair and washing your face,
stay in the inner chamber to learn sewing,
And never go out of the house, for others to see.

Diligence was not only highly valued because it could reduce the load of housework for a girl’s parents, but because it could also occupy girls to the extent that they would not have the time or opportunity to be seen by people outside of the house.

Proper composure and quietness:

It is very important for a virgin living in the inner chamber to be careful and cautious about what she says.
Never laugh loudly, and never speak in a loud voice,

or she will have a bad name among neighbours.
Always walk in a sedate manner,
and never lean against a doorframe or a wall when standing.

In China it was believed that a virgin is and should be quiet and shy (*jing ruo chuzi*). From the male point of view, proper manners would lead to a quality highly desired in girls: charm. If a virgin were to behave in a contradictory fashion, this would be perceived as a lack of proper upbringing in orthodox Confucian morality, and therefore the girl might be seen to possibly lack self-restraint in terms of sexuality. Ultimately, the girl would be deemed flippant (*qingtao nüzi*). Any physical contact between sexes, except between married couples, was strictly forbidden under Confucianism: males and females shall not allow their hands to touch in giving and receiving anything (*nannü shoushou buqin*).

Expected behaviour from seven to twenty:

At seven, she has to learn to behave like a grown-up.
In the morning she has to dress herself,
comb her hair, wash her face and bind her feet,
without playing around.
At eight and nine, she has to learn
to get along with her siblings,
to share food and drinks,
and never fight for better, bigger and more.
At ten, she has to concentrate on learning
making cotton shoes and other needlework.
She has to be in her mother’s company from morning till evening
and never go out of the inner chamber without permission.
At eleven, she is a grown-up now.
She has to learn cooking diligently,
and spend rest of the time on improving embroidery,
so that every leaf and every petal is perfect.
At twelve and thirteen,
she has to stand up when meeting visitors.
Even meeting close female relatives:
there is no excuse for omitting formalities.
From fourteen up to twenty,
she has to stay inside, to perfect her sewing skills
and to learn to manage every type of housework.
This is the important time for her to learn to be a housewife.

Filial piety, chastity, thrice obeying and four virtues were qualities highly valued in women according to orthodox Confucian morality.

Filial piety:

Filial piety is utterly important to every girl,
and Heaven is watching her all the time.
The kindness of a girl’s parents is as big as heaven and as deep as earth,
and a filial daughter has to devote herself entirely to repay it.

Chastity, thrice obeying and four virtues:

To be humble and submissive towards her husband is the rule.
For a woman to have a husband is like the earth having the sky.
“A hen crowing at dawn” would ruin the family,
and attract criticism from others.
Another rule is to adhere to chastity.
A piece of flawless jade makes everyone happy.
There were many chaste women since ancient times,
whose determination to remain chaste was as hard as iron.
For girls, thrice obeying is as follows:
before marriage, one should obey her father,

especially his order for her arranged marriage;
 during married life, obey one's husband and always act as his
 complement; and
 in widowhood, obey one's son, so as not to be lost.
 Girls are also to have four virtues.
 The first to have is fidelity, which includes propriety,
 justice, honesty and a sense of shame.
 Every movement in life cannot stray from the right path,
 and to prevent error one must be vigilant, like guarding against
 thieves.
 The second to have is a pleasing physical appearance,
 which does not mean using face powder or lipstick.
 It refers to bathing, to clean the body,
 and changing clothes that need washing, and mending in due
 time.
 Third to have is propriety in speech,
 to say what is proper
 that does not annoy anyone.
 A few wise words are better than many silly ones.
 Fourth to have is efficiency in needlework,
 this does not mean embroidering showy tigers or dragons.
 It means girls should do sewing, weaving and knitting,
 As well as help with cooking meals for the family.

This section comprises the central component of the Confucian moral requirement for girls and women. This can be summarised as the thrice obeying and four virtues which originated from the *Classic of Rites*. Among these rules, the idea of thrice obeying is paramount. Obedience to her father, as well as her mother, was essential to the notion of filial piety.

However, arranged marriages were not only for girls, but also for boys. According to the sage, Mencius (372 BC-289 BC), "If the young people, without waiting for the orders of their parents, and the arrangements of the go-betweens, should bore holes to steal a sight of each other, or go over the wall to be with each other, then their parents and all other people will despise them."² In saying this, he was criticising both boys and girls for breaching the rule of parents' orders and the go-between's arrangement (*fumu zhiming, meishuo zhiyan*).

Since the line of ancestry was traced using cosmological beliefs, male children were regarded as the continuation of the family. To find a wife for a son was to ensure the continuation. On rare occasions, men could marry without the permission of their parents, but only for the purpose of ensuring the continuity of the family line. Mencius used the example of the ancient sage, Shun, to illustrate his point: that having no posterity was the greatest filial danger, "Shun married without informing his parents because of this, – lest he should have no posterity. Superior men consider that his doing was the same as if he had informed them."³

But for a girl, it was different. In ancient times, her parents gave her away to another family to secure their posterity, often receiving some material goods in return. She was received by her husband's family as a chattel. The issue of virginity became crucial here, in order to preserve her future husband's pure bloodline. For the girl's own parents and family, virginity was a matter of

reputation and honour. A preventive measure to ensure virginity finally emerged, reaching the extreme – binding her feet to limit her freedom of movement. Separation of the sexes and the placement of unmarried girls in the inner-chamber of the house became the norm.

For a girl, her father's decision as to whom she should marry was an important one, determining the rest of her life. As a kind of chattel, she would not be the decision maker in her husband's family. For the sake of a pure bloodline and the reputation of both the family of her own parents and her husband's family, together with the notion of possession (chattel), the virtue of chastity was extended all the way from virginity to widowhood.

3. LIENÜ ZHUAN – BIOGRAPHIES OF EXEMPLARY WOMEN

During the early Han dynasty (202 BC-9 AD), Liu Xiang (79-8 BC) compiled *Lienü zhuan – Biographies of Exemplary Women*: the earliest extant book in Chinese tradition that was solely devoted to the moral moulding of girls. The book consists primarily of biographical accounts of women in ancient China who were extolled for their assorted virtues. After its composition, for the next two thousand years the book became the standard textbook for female moral education, encouraging generations of Chinese women to cultivate not only filial piety and maternal kindness, but even practices such as suicide and self-mutilation as a means of preserving chastity. Two extracts will demonstrate the meaning of chastity in the dynastic Chinese context. The following is the first example.

Jiang was the wife of King Zhao of the Chu State. One day the king departed for a trip and left his wife behind at the Jiang Terrace. While he was away, the king heard that heavy rains were causing the river near the terrace to rise, so he sent an official to take Jiang to a safer location. In his haste, however, the official neglected to bring his seal of commission – a badge to indicate that he was on official business. When the official arrived and asked Jiang to come with him, she replied, "The king has an agreement with his palace ladies that if he sends a summons he must use a seal of commission. Now, you do not carry the seal with you, so I dare not leave with you." "The river is rising rapidly," protested the official, "I fear that it will be too late if I return to get the seal." Jiang replied at length: "I have heard it said that 'the duty of the chaste woman is to honour an agreement and that the brave do not fear to die. This is because they preserve the rule of chastity.' I know that if I follow you I shall live; if I remain I must die. But it is better to remain here and die than to pursue life by breaking an agreement and violating righteousness." The official left to go get the seal, but it was indeed too late, and the floodwaters carried Jiang to her death. "Ah!" exclaimed the king upon hearing the news, "In preserving righteousness, you died for the rule of chastity. You would not trade your life for an improper act; you kept our agreement and maintained loyalty in order to perfect your chastity." He then bestowed on his deceased wife the honorary title "Jiang the Chaste".⁴

The term *zhen* (chastity) seems to have a very broad meaning. Undoubtedly it stands for the avoidance of

inappropriate sexual acts, but it further covers any behaviour that even appear in the eyes of others to lead to inappropriate contact. *Zhen* (chastity) denotes an extremely high level of desirable quality that prevents any contact between woman and man who were not married. Several terms are associated with the term *zhen* (chastity) in this story: obligation, reputation, faithfulness, uprightness, and honesty. The second example of chastity is “The Exalted conduct of the Widow of Liang”:

Gaoxing was a widow, “glorious in her beauty and praiseworthy in her conduct.” Her husband died when she was still young, but she refused to remarry despite many offers from distinguished noblemen of the region. Eventually the king himself heard of Gaoxing and sent a minister bearing betrothal gifts. Gaoxing replied: “My husband unfortunately died young; I live in widowhood to raise his children, and I am afraid that I have not given them enough attention. Many honourable men have sought me, but I have fortunately succeeded in evading them. Today the king is seeking my hand. I have learned that ‘the principle for a wife is that once having gone forth to marry, she will not change over, and that she may keep all the rules of chastity and faithfulness.’ To forget the dead and run to the living is not faithfulness; to be honoured and forget the lowly is not chastity; and to avoid righteousness and follow gain is not worthy of a woman.” Suspecting the main reason that the king and others pursued her was because of her physical beauty, Gaoxing took a mirror and knife and cut off her nose, disfiguring herself to do away with such pressure to remarry. The king praised her conduct and honoured her with the title “Gaoxing” – “Lofty Conduct”.⁵

Here, the term *zhen* (chastity) acquires an additional aspect of total commitment and devotion to a dead husband. The distinct sign of these qualities in this tale is the surviving wife’s devotion of all her energy to taking care for his children and refusing to remarry, which led to her self-mutilation. In this case, inappropriate sexual acts – outside of wedlock – were not even an issue, because the widow could have remarried. In both cases, the women did not show any sign of fear regarding one’s nose or one’s life. No sacrifice was too much as long as moral standards were concerned. And remaining chaste was the uppermost moral yardstick for women according to all Confucian morality texts for girls.

While in the patriarchal and polygamous society of dynastic China, male sexual desire and fantasy could be indulged in using endless excuses, without being condemned as breaching Confucian ethics, the sexual needs and satisfaction of women from good families (*liangjia funü*) were never recognised despite the earlier Confucian claim that human nature demanded food, drink and sex (drink, food, man, woman) – a claim that initially appeared to apply to both genders. Yi-tsi Feuerwerker (1975) finds that, in popular literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, aggressive female sexuality, an apparent product of male sexual fantasy, was often portrayed with a kind of fascination as well as horror: “her unmatched beauty, lovingly described, and insatiable sexual appetite brought destruction to others and ultimately resulted in

her own life coming to a gruesome end”, and “a man done in by lust, for which the woman is to blame, was the common theme in popular fiction” (p. 147).

On the one hand, females were believed to be timid and subordinate, and yet, on the other hand, they were forced to bear responsibilities for the moral decay and disruption of society (Wolf & Witke, 1975, p. 2). To increase their timidity, strengthen their subordination and to reduce their monstrous sexuality, one of the measures utilised was to occupy their time, mind and energy in needlework. Additionally, this solution offered a pragmatic solution as efficiency in needlework was required of good wives. In the *Classic for Girls*, references to needlework, sewing and embroidery were numerous, with the above quoted examples being just a few of them. It was a common belief that leisure would lead to sexual fantasy, as Lü K’un (16th century), a Ming dynasty official-scholar complained after examining the decadence of society, “The leisure available to young girls is also disturbing; would they not be susceptible to illicit amorous affairs?” (as cited in Handlin, 1975, p. 17).

4. THE TWENTY-FOUR PARAGONS OF FILIAL PIETY FOR WOMEN: AN ILLUSTRATED VERSION

Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety (Ershisi xiao tu) is a moral training book for boys. There was a book specifically written for uneducated girls: *Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women: An Illustrated Version*, originally written by an unknown author in the Ming dynasty and was later edited by Wu Jiayou (1850-1910). The following extract reveals the theme of the book:

In Xincheng County, Jiangxi Province, there was once a woman of the Chen family, who married a man by the name of Wang Zongluo. Once, while her husband was on official business capacity in another province, her mother-in-law became gravely ill with a disease of old age. The wife burned incense day and night, appealing to Heaven. She vowed to shorten the destined years of her own life to augment her mother-in-law’s lifespan.

Upon examining her, a physician said, “This malady of old-age is difficult, if not impossible, to cure. Only the liver of a dragon and the marrow of a phoenix can save her.” The wife believed him, and she said to herself, “Dragon’s liver is impossible to come by. Why not use my own liver in its place?” Thereupon, praying for blessings from the Kitchen God, she took up a knife and sliced into her belly, extracting a slice of her liver. Of this she made a broth, which she served to the sick old lady. She ate it, and she declared it delicious.

She asked, “What is this?” The wife lied, saying, “It is the liver of a sheep.” When her mother-in-law finished eating, her illness was immediately cured. Even though the wife felt no pain, the blood of her wound flowed unceasingly. All of this was observed by her husband’s younger sister, and the story spread quickly throughout the whole family. When the mother-in-law learned that the wife of her son had sliced her own liver, she cried bitterly and thanked her. The mother-in-law lived another twelve years before she died. When the provincial governor,

Duke Zhou heard this, he presented a placard for the Wang family gate. It read, "Such marvellous filial piety reaches all the way to Heaven!"

Subsequently, the wife enjoyed an extension of her lifespan to 108 years. During her life, her sons and grandsons numbered five generations under the same roof. On the day of her death, she gathered the family together, saying, "I am about to ascend into the heavens as an immortal. The Golden Boy (*jintong*) and Jade Girl (*yümü*) have come to welcome me!" Thus speaking, she departed. (Wu Jiayou, n.d.)

Society demanded that girls be more filial than boys. In the case of chastity, it was undeniably a complete double standard, as the Confucian society only demanded females to be chaste.

CONCLUSION

The Confucian standards set out for girls can be seen to be highly rigid, calling upon a strict adherence to a number of ideals, set out by the *Classic for Girls*. The concept of male dominance in these texts fully expresses the divine rights of Heaven, fathers and husbands. These spiritual bonds act as an extreme form of discrimination against and oppression of women without regard for their characters, stripping their thoughts and lives of autonomy and freedom, obliging them to follow the dictates of fate and the orders of parents and husband in everything. They could only remain confined in the home, to labour at weaving, cooking, and washing, and were not permitted to enter society. However, the qualities that a girl was expected to possess should not deem her to simply be a weaker, lesser person in the historical context of dynastic China. Rather, the following of these regulations was to be praised and admired by both males and females, as Jiang and Gaoxing prove. Moreover, the sense of delicacy and being forbidden, almost gave women an aura opposite to that of a completely subjugated status. Indeed, in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), every province, region, prefecture and county had to build a shrine of chastity and filial piety to officially praise and recognise chaste and filial women. Spring and Autumn Ceremonies of Sacrifices were also to be held at these monuments.

Nonetheless, this does not mitigate the fact that women living in ancient China were subject to a striking double standard, legitimised by the supernatural cosmological foundations of Confucianism. Indeed, it was only by religiously following these rules that a woman could gain a social standing higher than that of an object, whose only purpose was to serve. Against this context, what is implied by "a piece of flawless jade" and "the determination to remain chaste was as hard as iron", based on our modern standards, was nothing short of absurdity, repression and cruelty. With their only purpose being to carry out the male line of whomever their father chose to be the most suitable husband, the symbolic passing of

a girl from father to husband, and eventually to her own son shows the vice-like grip Confucian morality bound Chinese women into. This is most pertinent even after the significant male had passed away where a woman remained tied to a male name. Concretely, the inescapable destiny girls were born into was physically manifested in the tradition of foot-binding.

In this way, the repressive social hierarchy dominated by males was perpetuated, and the status quo maintained. Hence, the true irony of the multiplicity of systematic lies: daring heroic acts and mythical feats performed by females were all but an effort to avoid being reproached by their male counterparts. Additionally, ignoring the conflict between this way of living under constant inequality, and another statement Confucius made, that human nature required food, drink and sex, shows the way in which women's energy was to solely be directed to the reproduction and nurturing of a male line.

NOTES

¹ The English translation of the extracts of *Classic for Girls* discussed in this article is my own.

² The English translation is taken from Legge (1966, p. 268).

³ *Ibid.*, (p. 313).

⁴ The English translation is taken from Wu Hung (1989, pp. 261-262).

⁵ *Ibid.*, (pp. 253-254).

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