

Introduction

Gender and Virtue

Chastity used to be a virtue for men as well as women, hence the references to ‘chaste gentlemen’ in our literature. However, the chastity which is extolled today is for women only—men have no part in it... Virtues should be universal, required of all, within the reach of all, and beneficial to others as well as oneself. Only then are they worth having. But in addition to the fact that all men are excluded from what goes by the name of chastity today, not even all women are eligible for this honour. Hence it cannot be counted a virtue, or held up as an example.

—Lu Xun, *My Views on Chastity*¹

The virtuous women in this book were exemplary for their sagacity, prescience, expertise, political acumen, and rhetorical skill. The texts that represent them this way include historical annals, discourses, and life story narratives covering a broad period from the eighth to the first centuries B.C.E., as well as a variety of texts from Han dynasty tombs excavated during the past twenty years. These representations of women directly counter the familiar image of Chinese women as eternally oppressed, powerless, passive, and silent.

The topos of a feudal and unchanging Chinese state has lost much of its old currency, yet it continues to cloud one area of historical understanding in both China and the West, namely the assumption of the universal oppression of women in traditional China. There are many variations on this theme. A sociological version: The social system of China is unwaveringly patrilineal and patriarchal. It is based on the separation of men and women and relegates women to the inner quarters (and binds their feet to make sure they stay there). This organization of society excludes women from having legal rights, rights within the family, property owner-

1. Lu Xun 1918:117 and 119, tr. Yang 1973:138 and 140–41.

ship, the freedom to dispose of their own property or persons, and even denies them their own names.²

Another variation: The cosmological system of traditional China identifies women and the female or feminine as the inferior *yin* correlate of masculine *yang*. While yin and yang are mutually complementary and mutually necessary, yin is the inferior of any binary pair. This system is used to justify the submission of women to men, in the family and in society.

Yet another: The dominant philosophical system of China, loosely called Confucianism, emphasizes the inferior roles of women as wives, daughters, and mothers in a fundamentally hierarchical social order.

In this view, women are the moral and intellectual inferiors of men and require guidance, care, and control. Their chastity is their single most important aspect. This ethical system demands submission and self-sacrifice from women and restricts their activity to the family.³

The May Fourth movement added a twentieth-century, specifically Chinese, perspective: Feudal victimized woman represents the backwardness and dependency of China itself; the oppression of women shows the worst failures of China's past.

The May Fourth solution was nationalism and the strengthening of the state. Western solutions to the same problems include progress, development, Westernization, and feminism.⁴

These themes of patriarchy, Confucianism, and the feudal oppression of women informed much of the initial scholarship on China, and continue to do so. At the same time, gender has assumed increasing importance as a category of historical analysis. As Joan Scott points out in an influential study, the notion of gender is a product of epistemological turmoil. As a category of historical and philosophical analysis, it is one locus of the ongoing debate between those who claim that facts are transparent and those who argue that all realities are social and cultural constructions. Scott distinguished four areas in which gender operates: symbolic representations, normative concepts, social institutions, and constructions of sub-

2. The theme of the patriarchal oppression of women in traditional China informs a wide range of scholarship on women's literature (e.g., Hou 1986 Martin-Liao 1985, and Lee 1994) and within the social sciences (e.g., Ebrey 1990 and 1991; Holmgren 1979, 1985, and 1991; Mann 1992, 1994, and 1997; Watson 1986; Widmer 1989 and 1997; and Wolf and Witke 1975).

3. For accounts of the treatment of women in the *Five Classics*, see Guisso 1981. For discussion of yin as subordinate within the yin–yang polarity, see the discussion of correlative thinking in Graham 1989 and 1992.

4. This view of women informed the writings of such influential figures as Lu Xun (1918) and Chen Dongyuan (1928), who takes the exploitation of women as the central thesis of his *History of the Lives of Chinese Women*. Dorothy Ko (1994:1–10) argues that this May Fourth view distorts not only women's history, but our entire understanding of pre-nineteenth-century Chinese society.

jective identity. Central to her analysis is the notion that gender is a social construct, based on perceived differences between the sexes, especially differences of power.⁵

Serious attention to gender as a social construct suggests that we reexamine tacit assumptions about philosophical activity in ancient China, which are often based on transhistorical generalizations, essentialized normative concepts, “Confucian” or otherwise. Can we assume, for example, that the readers, writers and audience of Chinese philosophical works (however defined), at all times, were all men? Can we assume that references to “people” (*ren* 人), including a range of “sages” and “developed individuals” inevitably referred to men? The answers to these questions affect our understanding of Chinese cosmology, ethics, medicine, political philosophy and epistemology, as well as debates about “essential human nature.”

There are surprisingly few studies about the representation of women in Han and pre-Han China. Most sinological scholarship on women’s studies and gender studies addresses the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties and the twentieth century. These studies explore a range of writing for and by women during these periods and the roles of women in the construction of social institutions and social power.⁶ They range from exegetical accounts of Song and Ming dynasty didactic texts to strongly feminist critiques of the historically oppressive roles of patriarchy and so-called Confucian values. Some portray women as active participants in Chinese society, not as mere victims of gender and class.

These studies tend to frame the activities of women they chronicle against a transhistorical notion of Confucian ideology or the didactic texts that inculcated it.

To train females to meet the demands of motherhood and household management, didactic texts were written and transmitted through the dynasties, beginning with Liu Xiang’s *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. If Confucian education can be said to consist of two emphases and goals—moral cultivation and cultural education—males were supposed to excel in both, but females were to devote themselves to only the former.⁷

5. Scott 1988:41–44. For a useful account of the theoretical shift from “women’s studies” to “gender studies,” see Hevia 1995.

6. For studies of the social institutions and social power, see Carlitz 1991 and 1994; and Ebrey 1984, 1990, 1991, and 1993. For studies of neo-Confucian and Ming dynasty didactic literature about, or directed to, women, see Birge 1989 and 1992; Handlin 1975; and Kelleher 1985, 1985b, and 1987. For women writing for women, see Carlitz 1995, Furth 1992, Ko 1992 and 1994, Mann 1992, 1994, and 1997; Robertson 1992; and Widmer 1989 and 1997.

7. Ko 1994:53. By “frame against” I do not mean oppose. Ko’s study painstakingly examines the relations of the women she studies to neo-Confucian ideology and suggests that they viewed themselves as its adherents more than its critics.

Such descriptions of “didactic texts transmitted through the dynasties” run the risk of overlooking a number of important distinctions between the first Han and Later Han texts on women and their neo-Confucian descendants. Neo-Confucian didactic texts present an amalgam of instructions and exemplary life stories that conflate what were originally two distinct modes of writing, with distinct audiences and arguments.⁸ The content of these instruction texts and the selection of life stories of exemplary women in Song and Ming dynastic and local histories reflected the normative concepts of neo-Confucian orthodoxy, notably its concern for training women as mothers and its obsession with chastity. They simply omitted reference to intellectual and ethical excellences that had ceased to be categories of virtue in women. They disregard elements in Han, Later Han and Six Dynasties representations of women that did not fit neo-Confucian ideas about female conduct.

WOMEN AS INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL AGENTS

In this book I explore a range of Warring States and Han dynasty representations of women as intellectual and moral agents. The first part of the book is concerned with the portrayal of women as agents of specifically intellectual, political, and ethical virtue. By virtue I mean a trait of character that warrants admiration and “renders its possessor better, either morally, or intellectually, or in the conduct of specific affairs.”⁹ I take it as a given that the histories, discourses, and life stories upon which I draw were composed, interpreted, and transmitted by the educated and elite men who left virtually all surviving records and commentaries. Unlike some texts from later periods, these stories cannot be taken as representations of female subjectivity, however construed. These texts nevertheless portray women as being active and sometimes very effective participants within their own society, not inert victims of it. Women emerge as intellectual, moral, and political agents whose activities influence or determine their own well-being and that of their families and states.

I begin by introducing several representations of women in political life. One was the simple analogy between the loyalty of a devoted wife to her husband and

8. Various attempts have been made to classify texts about women. Sharon Shi-Juan Hou's entry on “Women's Literature” in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Hou 1986) distinguishes between biographies of women in history and theoretical accounts of female virtue, which stressed rules of conduct for everyday life. Tianchi Martin-Liao's discussion of textbooks for women (1985:167ff) distinguishes three broad types according to audience: texts addressed to the general public, including both exemplary biographies and instruction manuals; sections on women in family instructions or *jiaxun*, addressed to the author's own family; and texts written by empresses, works written by women for women but directed toward a specific individual or small audience of upper-class women.

9. I take this definition from the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Blackburn 1996:394.)

the loyalty of a devoted official to his ruler. This depiction assigned a woman no political role, but rather used one aspect of female virtue, wifely loyalty, to define male honor. It can be traced to analogies between sexual and political bonds of loyalty, service, and recognition in Warring States texts. In these Warring States formulations, male honor meant a willingness to die for a ruler or lord; in late imperial China, male honor or loyalty meant not changing dynastic allegiance. It correlated with the growth of female chastity cults during the late Ming and Qing dynasties.¹⁰

Various pre-Han texts include stories in which the rise and fall of states (and families) depends on the virtuous or pernicious influence of a woman. These stories portrayed women as agents of virtue and chaos: providers of sage counsel and admonition or dangerous catalysts of chaos and rebellion. A second representation opposes the positive influence of officially appointed ministers to the destructive influence of the “inner court.” In this view, royal wives and concubines, and their families, undermine the stability of states, either by distracting rulers from government toward dissolution or by promoting selfish interests at variance with the welfare of the state. The description of tensions between the “inner court” and “outer court” is a standard feature of both Chinese and Western accounts of imperial history.¹¹

A third representation portrays women as agents of specifically intellectual, political, and ethical virtue. Warring States historical narratives and Han “life stories” represented women who actively used distinctive skills and knowledge to educate and admonish, not only their sons or husbands, but the rulers of their states, and their influence is key to the fortunes of their states and families. I describe them as intellectual virtue stories because they single out women as being virtuous for their sagacity, intellect, strategy, and statecraft.¹² In China as in Western philosophical, religious, and hagiographic traditions, the classification and selection of virtues changed according to the central preoccupations of the times. While collected biographies of virtuous women became a standard feature of dynastic histories, the distinctive representations of the Warring States and Han stories of learned, technically skilled, and rhetorically adroit women disappeared from later collections.

The single most important source for intellectual virtue stories was the *Collected Life Stories of Women* or *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, conventionally ascribed to the great Han scholar Liu Xiang 劉向 (c. 79–8 B.C.E.). It was a selection of anecdotes from the lives of exemplary women to illustrate six explicitly named virtues. Three of the six chapters of the *Lienü zhuan* are devoted to intellectual virtue stories. Since Plato and Aristotle, the Western philosophical tradition has tended to assume the unity of virtue, either in the sense that all particular virtues derive from an underlying,

10. For important changes in gentry culture from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, see Chow 1994, especially pp. 205–17.

11. For discussions of inner (*nei chao* 內朝 or *nei ting* 內廷) see Bielenstein 1980:154f and Hucker 1985:342 and 352.

12. I define this term at greater length in chapter 1.

unitary “virtue” or in the sense that virtues are mutually interdependent. The compilers of the *Lienü zhuan* seem to have held no such presumption, as there is no attempt to link these individual virtues to a unitary notion of virtue, gendered or otherwise.¹³

These stories appear within a new genre of historical writing of “collected biographies” (*lie zhuan* 列傳) associated in the Han with the *Shi ji* and the historiography of Sima Qian and with a variety of compendia of “collected life stories” ascribed to Liu Xiang.¹⁴ I refer to the *Lienü zhuan* narratives as (exemplary) life stories to contrast them to the full biographies of the *Shi ji* and later dynastic histories based upon it.

Both inner court stories and intellectual virtue stories presented women as bellwethers of their states: givers of sage counsel or catalysts of chaos. Their central argument was that “the instruction of kings proceeds from inner to outer.”¹⁵ It was assumed that the women closest to a ruler—his mother, empress, and concubines—were the major agents of intellectual and moral influence. Thus, exemplary women—positive and negative—made their countries flourish or perish. I argue that the intellectual abilities and specific knowledge attributed to these prescient and sagacious women closely corresponded to those of their male counterparts—sages, ministers, and generals.

According to Han tradition, Liu Xiang compiled the *Lienü zhuan* to make this very argument to a Han emperor. The argument also appears in persuasions addressed to rulers by ministers in Warring States texts. Finally, it appears in the introduction to the collected biographies of empresses in the two major historical works of the Han dynasty. These representations of intellectually virtuous women appeared in arguments by men to men, for a variety of rhetorical or didactic purposes. Liu Xiang and the ministers of Warring States discourses used them rhetorically to persuade rulers to undertake (or abandon) specific courses of action. Han historians also used them for didactic purposes, and after the Han, dynastic histories included chapters of biographies of women. These exemplary life stories emphasize the agency and participation, indeed the centrality, of women in representations of both ethical virtue and the Han state.¹⁶

13. The account of the putative reasoning and actual skills of the women of these chapters may be of particular interest to students of virtue ethics, for whom an important problem is “to account for how the virtuous agent thinks.” (Blackburn 1996:395)

14. These include the *Collected Lives of Honorable Men* (*Lieshi zhuan*) and *Collected Lives of Immortals* (*Lieshan zhuan*), both attributed to Liu Xiang. For discussion of these works and other *lie zhuan* collections, see Campamy 1996:40–41 and 46–47. The *Lieshan zhuan* is discussed in further detail in chapter 1.

15. HS 36:1957–58.

16. The counter-argument, that “virtuous women” were a useful rhetorical trope precisely because of their irrelevance to politics, implies that women lacked “practical power.” The evidence of Warring States and Han histories (especially the opprobrium heaped on Empress Lü) and a plethora of inner court stories suggest otherwise.

In inner court stories, women and ministers represent antagonistic and mutually exclusive influences. In intellectual virtue stories, women and ministers were counterparts, and women exercise the same intellectual skills as men. Both portrayed women of various social classes as being intelligent agents who worked effectively within the gender systems of their time and whose activities affected the rise and fall of states and dynasties. These stories show gender working at the heart, rather than at the peripheries, of history. Finally, their indigenous representations of female intellectual and ethical virtue provide a counterpoint to the representations of Western feminism.

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF MEN AND WOMEN

In the second part of this book, I examine historical changes in the use of the two indigenous Chinese polarities that delineated what we now call gender: *yin-yang* 陰陽 and the separate spheres of inner and outer (*nei-wai* 內外). These terms have been widely used as transhistorical universals to denote male and female essences. The *yin-yang* schema has tended to provide a rationale for the disparagement of women, by the correlative association of women with *yin*—earth, debasement, and desire. The separate spheres of *nei* and *wai* have been interpreted to prescribe the restriction of women to the “inner quarters” of the home and thereby completely separate the sexes, intellectually and politically as well as socially and physically. In these views, Confucian ideology used the notions of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* and the textual authority of the *Five Classics* to justify (and have been attacked for justifying) the social and political submission of women to men, the exclusion of women from a direct role in public life, and the assertion that women were intellectually and morally inferior to men.¹⁷ In this part of the book I critically examine the conventional readings of the “official ideology” of Han Confucianism, with a particular eye to the differences between the “pre-Confucian” layers of these works and the interpretations of late Warring States commentaries and Han interpretations.

Of the *Five Classics*, the *Li ji* or *Book of Rites* provided the basis for a large variety of instruction manuals that gave specific directions for the differentiation of men and women in ritual and domestic contexts. The *Rites* provided the basis for both female instruction manuals and family instructions. Of these, the most influential was an instruction text, written by a woman and addressed to women. The *Admonitions for Women* or *Nü jie* 女誡, written by the great Later Han scholar Ban Zhao 班昭 (also known by the honorific name of Cao Dagu 曹大家), consisted of seven chapters of instructions to women on correct conduct as wives. It emphasized the importance of distinctions between women and men, either as having separate natures (*yin* and *yang*) or separate spheres. It was widely emulated in later instruction texts.

17. For example, by Guisso 1981 and Sung 1981.

Ban Zhao's *Admonitions* drew extensively on the *Rites* for its account of yin and yang and for its regulations for the inner quarters in its own highly influential account of the virtues women should cultivate and the rules of conduct they should follow. The *Rites* thus became the indirect source for later female instruction manuals, which quoted extensively from the *Admonitions*. (Some are dialogues in which Ban Zhao is a teacher providing instruction.)

CONTENTS

This book is organized into two distinct parts. In Part 1 I address two divergent views of women in early texts: as agents of virtue, whose influence founds dynasties and guides and admonishes both male relatives and rulers; and as causes of chaos, whose influence brings down dynasties and destroys their families and states. I draw on the genre of exemplary life story and its sources, primarily with depictions of intellectual virtues in exemplary women. In these chapters I contrast two types of stories: tales of women as agents of moral and political virtue and tales of women as causes of moral and political chaos. In chapter 1 I introduce the intellectual virtue stories of the *Lienü zhuan* and the problems of interpretation associated with them. In chapter 2 I examine representations of women as agents of virtue, the range of expertise ascribed to them, and the particular role of prediction and rhetorical skills in their activities. In chapter 3 I turn to their opposite numbers: legendary stories about destructive beauties with inhuman appetites and "historical" accounts of the threat of female intervention in political life, notably the regency (or rule) of Empress Lü. All these stories represent women as causes of political and ethical chaos.

The *Lienü zhuan* underwent many changes from the time of its alleged compilation by Liu Xiang to the Song text that was the basis of later editions. In chapter 4, after a brief discussion of dating and authorship, I turn to what I call the textual matrix of the *Lienü zhuan* intellectual virtue stories: Warring States texts that clearly antedate the *Lienü zhuan* and contain similar or identical speeches, arguments, or narratives. I show that many of the *Lienü zhuan* intellectual virtue stories correspond almost verbatim to accounts in the *Zuo zhuan*, *Guo yu*, and other Warring States texts. This examination demonstrates that the intellectual virtue stories are not an invention of the *Lienü zhuan*; their portrayal of the intellectual abilities of women reflected or corresponded to earlier narratives. It also provides an alternative approach to the vexed question of the dating and authorship of the text. Since the first Song dynasty editions, commentators have attempted to accept or reject the attribution of the *Lienü zhuan* to Liu Xiang, but without conclusive result. In chapter 4 I establish that many of the intellectual virtue stories in the received texts of the *Lienü zhuan* have close or identical correlations to Warring States texts to which Liu Xiang, as head bibliographer of the Han court, would presumably have had access (whether or not he drew on them as direct sources).

In chapter 5, I turn to important changes in the organization and content of Ming editions of the *Lienü zhuan*, which distinguished them from their Han–Song predecessors. I show how changes in the organization of these works contributed to the demise of the intellectual virtue narratives. Next I use several examples to examine the effects of illustrated editions on the reception of these stories.

In Part 2 I take up the two polarities that have dominated the Chinese discourse on men and women: yin–yang and nei–wai. Both have been used extensively to explain or justify the inferior status of women. Chapters 6 and 7 examine yin–yang theories. Chapter 6 focuses on the transformation from the early uses of yin–yang to its central place in Han correlative cosmology, with special emphasis on analogies between *yin* and *yang* and men and women (*yin–yang nan–nü*). Chapter 7 examines some of the tensions in these analogies with a brief discussion of the treatment of women in pre-Han and Han medical theory and practice. In the last three chapters I address the theme of the distinction (or separation) of men and women (*nan nü zhi bie*) in the *Five Classics* (chapters 8 and 9), and in later instruction texts based on them, especially the *Admonitions* (chapter 10).

I end by touching on two problems of contemporary debate: whether women think differently from men (in particular, claims for a distinct “female ethic”) and the role of contemporary “neo-Confucian” ideologies and their appropriations of Chinese views of gender. A variety of existing scholarship suggests or demonstrates the relative mobility of women during the Warring States and early Han, and changing representations of women during and after the Song. I hope to use the sagacious heroines of this book to ask a different question: (How) can a woman become a sage? Is Confucian gender metaphysics an improvement over its Western counterparts? Or did successive waves of Confucian ideologies overwhelm and increasingly “gender” earlier traditions about wisdom, moral judgment, and political efficacy?