



# THE CONFUCIAN FOUR BOOKS FOR WOMEN

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A New Translation of the *Nü Sishu* and the  
Commentary of Wang Xiang

Translated with introductions and notes by  
ANN A. PANG-WHITE

The Confucian  
*Four Books for Women*



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## Note on Other Editions and on This Translation

THE *FOUR BOOKS for Women* (*Nü sishu* 《女四書》) has been widely circulated since the late sixteenth century. The earliest edition known today is the 1624 Duowentang edition 多文堂刊本.<sup>1</sup> This collection was also published in Japan and Korea from the seventeenth century to the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Several Chinese editions of the *Nü sishu* are available today, including the following:

1. *Zhuangyuange nü sishu jizhu* 《狀元閣女四書集註》 (Zhuangyuange Edition of the *Nü sishu* with Commentary) by Wenchengtang 文成堂, 1885 (in Chinese). This 1885 printing includes an extensive commentary by Wang Xiang 王相 (a Ming scholar, the compiler of the *Nü sishu*, and the son of Madame Liu, author of one of the *Four Books for Women*).<sup>3</sup> This edition also contains the 1580 imperial edict (萬曆八年) issued by Emperor Shenzong of the Ming dynasty 明神宗 (r. 1573–1620), commissioning a Confucian scholar-official (*ru chen* 儒臣) to compile Ban Zhao's 班昭 *Lessons for Women* (*Nüjie* 《女誡》) and Empress Renxiaowen's 仁孝文皇后 *Teachings for the Inner Court* (*Neixun* 《內訓》) in one volume and to promulgate it to the public. Thus, the Zhuangyuange edition has Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women* (c. 100) and Empress Renxiaowen's *Teachings for the Inner Court* (c. 1405) as part I (*juan shang* 卷上), followed somewhat anachronistically by the Song sisters' (Song Ruoxin 宋若莘 and Song Ruozhao 宋若昭) *Analects for Women* (*Nü lunyu* 《女論語》) and Madame Liu's 劉氏 *Short Records of Models for Women* (*Nüfan jielu* 《女範捷錄》) as part II (*juan xia* 卷下). This edition is available both in print (archived at several research institutes and universities) and online.<sup>4</sup>
2. *Huitu nü sishu baihua jie* 《繪畫女四書白話解》 (Illustrated *Nü sishu*, with Explanations in Vernacular Chinese) (Taipei: Laoku Publishing 老古文化事業股份有限公司, 2012; a reprint of the 1908 text) (in Chinese). This illustrated edition contains four paintings by Li Wenquan 李文銓 depicting

the women authors of these four books. As suggested by its title, this edition intends to make the *Nü sishu* more accessible to the common public. The preface by Madame Shen-Zhang 沈張氏 immediately repudiates the received opinion that “without talent is a woman’s virtue.” She further states that she was educated by her mother, later became a widow at a young age, and single-handedly raised and taught her two sons. Now in her old age, she had the leisure to reread the *Nü sishu* and believes that their lessons are beneficial to all women. Through education, women can contribute significantly to the flourishing of the family and the state. She therefore requests her daughter-in-law, Mme. Shen Zhukun 沈朱坤, to provide commentary in vernacular Chinese so that the contents of the *Four Books for Women* can be easily understandable to teachers at girls’ or women’s schools (*nü xuetaang* 女學堂) and to parents and young girls at home.

3. *Nü sishu jizhu yizheng* 《女四書集注義證》 (Four Books for Women with Selections from Traditional Commentaries) by Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 2008). In this 2008 book, Huang Yanli examines several editions of the *Nü sishu* and tracks down the origins of historical references and explanatory notes, including Wang Xiang’s. This book also includes an essay by Huang exploring the meaning of the *Nü sishu* in the contemporary context. In contrast with the Zhuangyuange edition, Huang arranges the four books according to a historical timeline; thus, the Song sisters’ *Analects for Women* comes second and Empress Renxiaowen’s *Teachings for the Inner Court* comes third.

This English translation project bases its translation on the Zhuangyuange edition while consulting editions 2 and 3, listed here, for accuracy. To streamline our understanding of the historical development of social perception and expectation of women, women’s education, virtue, and self-identity across the sixteen hundred years of Chinese history, I have arranged these four books in chronological order.

To keep the flow of the original text uninterrupted so that the reader can better appreciate the authors’ arguments, and because Wang Xiang’s commentaries are substantial and often exceed the length of the original text, I have placed his commentaries and my annotations in the “Commentaries and Annotations” section that immediately follows the original text, at the end of each chapter. Moreover, to differentiate my annotations from Wang Xiang’s commentaries, Wang’s commentaries are italicized and introduced with the phrase “Wang Xiang’s commentary,” whereas my annotations are set in roman and most are preceded with “Translator’s annotation.” I have also opted a more literal translation of the text so as to keep the texture of classic Chinese as much as possible.

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1. Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funü zhuzuokao* 《曆代婦女著作考》 (*Verified Records of Women's Writings Through the Ages*) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1985), 843. See also Huang Liling 黃麗玲, “*Nü sishu yanjiu*” 《女四書》研究 (“Research on the *Four Books for Women*”) (MA thesis, Taiwan Nanhua University 臺灣南華大學, 2003), 36–37. According to Huang’s research, scene five of a renowned Ming dynasty novel, Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 *Mudan ting* 《牡丹亭》, explicitly mentioned *Nü sishu* as one of the books studied by the main female character Du Liniang 杜麗娘. Since *Mudan ting* was published in 1598, Huang argues that *Nü sishu* must have already been popular by 1598 for it to be cited in a novel. *Mudan ting* is translated into English as the *Peony Pavilion: Mudan ting*, trans. Cyril Birch, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
2. Japanese and Korean editions of the *Nü sishu* took varied forms. Some editions replaced the *Short Records of Model for Women* with the *Filial Piety for Women* or placed the former in the appendix. See Huang Liling, “*Nü sishu yanjiu*,” 52–3.
3. Not much direct biographic records about Wang Xiang are available. However, in addition to *Nü sishu*, several other important texts for primary education, such as *Qianjiashi zhujie* 《千家詩註解》, also bore his name as a commentator.
4. Print copies are archived at Harvard University, Wuhan University (China), China’s National Library, and Academia Sinica (Taiwan), among others. The digitized version is available through Google Books (however, it has several missing pages). Other online versions derived from the Zhuangyuange edition with modern punctuation in Chinese are also readily accessible.



# *Chronology of Chinese Dynasties and Republics*

## *Legendary Ancient Period*

Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors (*Sanhuang wudi* 三皇五帝)

### **Three Sovereigns** (*Sanhuang* 三皇)

Fu Xi 伏羲 or Heavenly Sovereign (Tianhuang 天皇)

Shennong 神農 or Tai Sovereign (Taihuang 泰皇)/

Ren Sovereign (Renhuang 人皇)

Nüwa 女媧 or Earthly Sovereign (Dihuang 地皇)\*

### **Five Emperors** (*Wudi* 五帝)

Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝)

Emperor Zhuanxu (顓頊)

Emperor Ku (嚳)

Emperor Yao (堯)

Emperor Shun (舜)

## *Ancient Dynasties*

Xia dynasty 夏 (c. 2100–1600 BCE)

Shang dynasty 商 (c. 1600–1046 BCE)

Zhou dynasty 周 (c. 1046–256 BCE)

— Western Zhou (Xizhou 西周) (c. 1046–771 BCE)

— Eastern Zhou (Dongzhou 東周) (c. 770–256 BCE)

— Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu 春秋) (770–476 BCE)

— Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國) (475–222 BCE)

\* Some accounts replace Nüwa with Suiren 燧人, Zhurong 祝融, or Gonggong 共工.

*Imperial Dynasties*

Qin dynasty 秦 (221–206 BCE)

Han dynasty 漢 (206 BCE–220 CE)

- Western Han (Xihan 西漢) (206 BCE–8 CE)
- Xin dynasty 新 (9–25 CE)
- Eastern Han (Donghan 東漢) (25–220)

Three kingdoms (Sanguo 三國) (220–265 CE)

Jin dynasty 晉 (265–420 CE)

- Western Jin (Xijin 西晉) (265–316)
- Sixteen Kingdoms (Shiliuguo 十六國) (303–c. 420)
- Eastern Jin (Dongjin 東晉) (317–420)

Northern and Southern dynasties (Nanbeichao 南北朝) (420–589 CE)

Sui dynasty 隋 (581–618 CE)

Tang dynasty 唐 (618–907 CE)

Five dynasties and Ten kingdoms (Wudai shiguo 五代十國) (907–960 CE)

Liao dynasty 遼 (907–1125)

Song dynasty 宋 (960–1279 CE)

- Northern Song (Beisong 北宋) (960–1126)
- Southern Song (Nansong 南宋) (1127–1279)

Western Xia dynasty (Xixia 西夏) (1038–1227)

Jin dynasty 金 (1115–1234)

Yuan dynasty 元 (1271–1368 CE)

Ming dynasty 明 (1368–1644 CE)

Qing dynasty 清 (1644–1911 CE)

*Republics*

Republic of China (Zhonghua Minguo 中華民國) (1911–Present)

People's Republic of China (Zhongguo Renmin Gongheguo 中國人民共和國) (1949–Present)

## *Essential Classic Chinese Terms and Corresponding English Translations*

THE FOLLOWING IS not meant to be an exhaustive list, but it includes words, terms, titles, and names frequently used in this volume.

ai 愛	love
<i>Baibu tongyi</i> 白虎通義	<i>Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall</i>
Ban Zhao 班昭	Han woman scholar, historian, author of <i>Nüjie</i>
bei 卑	lowly
<i>Beishi</i> 北史	<i>History of Northern Dynasties</i>
bie 別	distinction
cai de 才德	talent and virtue
chong 寵	favorite, indulge, pamper, spoil
<i>Chunqiu</i> 春秋	<i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i>
<i>Chunqiu fanlu</i> 春秋繁露	<i>Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals</i>
ci 慈	kindness, benevolence
cong 從	following, obedience; follow, obey
<i>Daxue</i> 大學	<i>Great Learning</i>
de 德	virtue
Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒	Han Confucian political thinker, author of <i>Chunqiu fanlu</i>
en 恩	favor, grace, kindness, loving-kindness
fu 夫	husband
fu 婦	wife, married woman, woman
fu 父	father
fufu 夫婦	husband and wife
fumu 父母	father and mother, parents
gang 剛	strong, firm
gu 姑	mother-in-law

<i>Gujin tushu jicheng</i> 古今圖書集成	<i>Collection of Illustrations and Books from Antiquity to the Present</i>
<i>Guoyu</i> 國語	<i>Discourses of the States</i>
Han 漢	name of a Chinese dynasty
<i>Hanshu</i> 漢書	<i>Book of Han</i>
he 和	harmony, harmonize
<i>Houhanshu</i> 後漢書	<i>Book of Later Han</i>
hui 惠	favor
jian 儉	frugality
jie 節	integrity, principledness
<i>Jin silu</i> 近思錄	<i>Reflection on Things at Hand</i>
jing 靜	quiet
jing 敬	respect
jingbiao 旌表	honor-commendation system
<i>Jinshi</i> 金史	<i>History of Jin</i> 金
<i>Jinshu</i> 晉書	<i>Book of Jin</i> 晉
jiu 舅	father-in-law
jiugu 舅姑	parents-in-law
<i>Jiutangshu</i> 舊唐書	<i>Old Book of Tang</i>
Kongzi 孔子	Confucius
<i>Kongzi jiaoyu</i> 孔子家語	<i>Family Discourse of Confucius</i>
kun 坤	paradigm, trigram, or hexagram representing Earth, female, woman, yin
lei 類	kind(s), category/categories
li 禮	ritual(s), rite(s), ritual propriety
li 理	principle, reason
<i>Liji</i> 禮記	<i>Record/Book of Rites/Rituals</i>
lie 列	row, list
lie 烈	ardent, passionate; ardency, passion
<i>Lienü zhuan</i> 列女傳	<i>Biographies of Women</i>
Liu Shi 劉氏	Madame Liu (also known as Wang jiefu 王節婦), author of <i>Nüfan jielu</i> , mother of Wang Xiang
Liu Xiang 劉向	Han scholar-official, author and compiler of <i>Lienü zhuan</i>
<i>Lunyu</i> 論語	<i>Analects</i>
Mengzi 孟子	Mencius, influential Confucian during the Warring States period
<i>Mengzi</i> 孟子	<i>Book of Mencius, the Mencius</i>
ming 明	enlightened, intelligent, clear, bright; enlightenment, intelligence

Ming 明	name of a Chinese dynasty
<i>Mingshi</i> 明史	<i>History of Ming</i>
mu 母	mother, female
mu 睦	friendliness
nan 男	male(s), man/men, boy(s)
nei 內	inner, internal
<i>Neixun</i> 內訓	<i>Teachings for the Inner Court</i>
neiwai zhibie 內外之別	inner-outer distinction
nü 女	female(s), woman/women, girl(s)
<i>Nüfan jielu</i> 女範捷錄	<i>Short Records of Models for Women</i>
<i>Nüjie</i> 女誡	<i>Lessons for Women</i>
<i>Nü lunyu</i> 女論語	<i>Analects for Women</i>
<i>Nü sishu</i> 女四書	<i>Four Books for Women</i>
<i>Nüxian</i> 女憲	<i>Decrees for Women</i>
<i>Nü xiaojing</i> 女孝經	<i>Classic of Filial Piety for Women</i>
<i>Nüze</i> 女則	<i>Regulations for Women</i>
qi 氣	vital energy, psycho-physical force
qi 妻	wife
qian 乾	trigram or hexagram representing Heaven, male, man, yang
<i>Qianhanshu</i> 前漢書	<i>Book of Former Han</i> , another name for <i>Book of Han</i>
qin 勤	diligence
qing 清	tranquility, serenity; tranquil, serene
Qing 清	name of a Chinese dynasty
qucong 曲從	conceding obedience
rang 讓	yielding
ren 仁	humaneness, benevolence; humane, benevo- lent, human-heartedness
Renxiaowen huanghou 仁孝文皇后	Empress Renxiaowen, author of <i>Neixun</i>
rou 柔	gentle
ru 儒	intellectual, scholar, literati
ruo 弱	weak
sangcong 三從	three obediences
sangang 三綱	three bonds
<i>Sanguo yanyi</i> 三國演義	<i>The Three Kingdoms</i>
<i>Sanguozhi</i> 三國志	<i>History of the Three Kingdoms</i>
<i>Shangshu</i> 尚書	<i>Book of Documents, Book of History</i>
sheng 聖	sage, sagely, holy
<i>Shiji</i> 史記	<i>Historical Records</i> , or <i>Historical Records of the Grand Historian</i>

<i>Shijing</i> 詩經	<i>Classic of Poetry, Book of Poetry, the Odes</i>
shun 順	compliance, obedience; comply, obey
Shun 舜	legendary sage king in pre-dynastic ancient China
side 四德	four (womanly) virtues
<i>Siku quanshu</i> 四庫全書	<i>Complete Library in Four Sections</i>
<i>Sishu</i> 四書	<i>Four Books</i>
sixing 四行	four (womanly) conducts
Song 宋	name of a Chinese dynasty
Song Ruohua 宋若華	another name of Song Ruoxin
Song Ruoxin 宋若莘	Tang woman scholar, author of <i>Nü lunyu</i>
Song Ruozhao 宋若昭	Tang woman scholar, author of <i>Nü lunyu</i>
<i>Songshi</i> 宋史	<i>History of Song</i>
Tang 唐	name of a Chinese dynasty
<i>Tangshu</i> 唐書	<i>Book of Tang</i>
<i>Wangshi ji lienü zhuan</i> 汪氏輯列女傳	<i>Wangshi's Biographies of Women</i>
wai 外	outer, external
Wang jiefu 王節婦	Chaste Widow Wang, maiden name Liu Shi 劉氏, author of <i>Nüfan jielu</i>
Wang Xiang 王相	Compiler and commentator of <i>Nü sishu</i>
wuchang 五常	five constant virtues
wulun 五倫	five relationships
wuxing 五行	five elements, five processes
xian 閒	leisurely composure
xian 賢	virtuous, worthy
xiao 孝	filialness, filial piety
<i>Xiaojing</i> 孝經	<i>Classic of Filial Piety</i>
xin 心	heart, mind
<i>Xintangshu</i> 新唐書	<i>New Book of Tang</i>
<i>Xinyuanshi</i> 新元史	<i>New History of Yuan</i>
xing 行	conduct
xing 性	nature
<i>Xu jin silu</i> 續近思錄	<i>Further Reflection on Things at Hand</i>
ya 雅	elegance
yang 陽	category/paradigm describing the strong, active, moving, etc., in comparison with yin
Yao 堯	legendary sage king in pre-dynastic ancient China
yi 義	righteousness
yi 易	change, changes

yi 儀	ceremony, model, mode
<i>Yijing</i> 易經	<i>Book/Classic of Changes</i>
<i>Yili</i> 儀禮	<i>Book of Ceremonial Rites, Book of Etiquette and the Ceremonial</i>
yin 陰	category/paradigm describing the gentle, receptive, still, etc., in comparison with yang
you 幽	solitude, seclusion, tranquility, serenity; deep, reclusive, hidden
<i>Yuanshi</i> 元史	<i>History of Yuan</i>
zhe 哲	wise, intelligent; wisdom, intelligence
zhen 貞	correct and firm, pure, chaste; purity, chastity
Zheng Shi 鄭氏	Madame Zheng, author of <i>Classic of Filial Piety for Women</i>
zhi 智	wise; wisdom
zhihui 智慧	wisdom
<i>Zhouli</i> 周禮	<i>Zhou Rituals, Rites of Zhou</i>
Zhu Xi 朱熹	Neo-Confucian scholar of Song dynasty
<i>Zhuzi yulei</i> 朱子語類	<i>Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi</i>
<i>Zuozhuan</i> 左傳	<i>Zuo Commentary</i> [to the <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i> ]



## Introduction

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# *Uncovering the Confucian Four Books for Women—Why Nü sishu? Why Now?*

*Yet only to educate men and not to educate women, are they  
not being partial in treating the two sides?*

—Ban Zhao, *Nüjie* 《女誡》 (*Lessons for Women*)

*Although the great way of governing in peace rests on men, yet a  
wise woman surpasses a man.*

—Liu Shi (Madame Liu), *Nüfan jielu* 《女範捷錄》 (*Short  
Records of Models for Women*)

### *I. Introduction*

Traditional China's gender-oppressive social practices in the past, such as foot binding, forced widowhood, female infanticide, and exclusion of women from the public realm, coupled with its refusal of women's equal access to social advancement even in the present, continue to generate the public perception that Chinese philosophy undermines liberal feminist causes.<sup>1</sup> Confucianism, in particular, is often regarded as the main instigator that legitimizes all this oppression. Not surprisingly, much Eastern and Western feminist critique in modern times tends to be anti-Confucian. Nonetheless, transcultural feminists (whether in the West or in the East) who uncritically endorse the values of liberalism have been heavily criticized in more recent feminist discourse as being neo-colonial and one-sided in their exclusive use of the liberal definition of equality as the universal—and only—measuring stick to judge cultural practices outside the West.<sup>2</sup> This neo-colonial mentality may have resulted from a lack of familiarity with women's traditions in other civilizations, which in turn may have been caused in part by the scarcity of primary texts—especially those authored by women—in English translation.

Culturally and philosophically, we must consider whether the term “feminism” (which is of Western origin) needs to be *broadened* and *redefined* if we are to treat non-Western cultures as true equals, true conversation partners, on this important subject. It should be noted that this chapter is not intended to conceal Confucianism’s anti-feminist motif. Rather, it is to call attention to essential textual, cultural, and historical elements in the Confucian tradition, in particular the *Nü sishu* 《女四書》 (*Four Books for Women*), that modern readers may have bypassed owing to their cultural blinders. Uncovering these hidden elements is a critical step toward our fair assessment, as well as creative reconstruction, of Confucian philosophy and the *real* identity of Chinese women.

One thing to be sure is that Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) never directly wrote any treatise on women nor did he formally teach any female students. Remarks about women historically attributed to him are found only a few times in the *Lunyu* 《論語》 (*Analects*) and in some other classic texts. Nonetheless, the infamous *Analects* 17.23 (in some versions, 17.25) has been a major target of the gender critique of Confucianism since the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that the troubled history of Confucianism has much to do with the symbolic female subordination in the husband–wife relation and how it became entangled with the political symbolism of the ruler–minister relation by means of a politicized reading of the *yin–yang* metaphysics.<sup>3</sup>

Recent scholarship has been careful in separating *original* Confucianism from *politicized* Confucianism. Thus, if one is willing to reimagine the functions that Confucian norms play through the eyes of Chinese women when they are exercised authentically rather than abusively, the feminist potential of a depoliticized Confucianism is not out of bounds. We shall explore this possibility by closely examining a controversial set of four books, the *Nü sishu*, compiled and commented on by Wang Xiang 王相 (c. 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century), a Ming scholar and the son of Madame Liu (one of the authors of the *Nü sishu*). For some readers, the *Nü sishu* have perpetuated androcentric Confucian patriarchy, while for others these four books have contributed significantly to women’s literary tradition.

The *Nü sishu* (*Four Books for Women*) were regarded as a counterpart to the famous *Sishu* 《四書》 (*Four Books*) grouped by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE), a Song Neo-Confucian. In the Confucian tradition, the four books for gentlemen’s learning included: (1) the *Analects*, (2) the *Mencius*, (3) the *Great Learning*, and (4) the *Book of the Mean*. The *Sishu* exerted immense influence on Chinese society, thought, and culture, particularly in the period from 1313 to 1905 during which these four books were used as standard textbooks for the imperial civil service examination. Similarly, the *Nü sishu* were considered a very important

collection of four didactic texts for the education of women. Unlike the *Sishu*, however, the *Nü sishu* were written by women and included:

1. *Nüjie* 《女誡》 (*Lessons for Women*): by a Han dynasty woman historian Ban Zhao 班昭 (a.k.a. Cao Dagu 曹大家, c. 45–117)<sup>4</sup>
2. *Nü lunyu* 《女論語》 (*Analects for Women*): by two sisters of the Tang dynasty, Song Ruoxin 宋若莘 (?–820) and Song Ruozhao 宋若昭 (?–825)
3. *Neixun* 《內訓》 (*Teachings for the Inner Court*): by Empress Renxiaowen 仁孝文皇后 (1361–1407) of the Ming dynasty
4. *Nüfan jielu* 《女範捷錄》 (*Short Records of Models for Women*): by Chaste Widow Wang 王節婦 of the Ming dynasty, also known by her maiden name Madame Liu 劉氏 (c. 16<sup>th</sup> century)

These four books spanned approximately 1,600 years from the first century to the sixteenth century, covering several Chinese dynasties. They provide readers with an invaluable view of the continuity and the longstanding tradition of Chinese women's writings, lives, education, history, and philosophy. The whole set is translated into English for the first time in this current volume. This collection provides *lived* narratives of *real* women that debunk the prevailing bias in several world philosophies and religions that women are more bound by their bodies than men are and, consequently, are more easily swayed by emotions and less capable of rational thinking.

Considering recent criticism directed toward the unidirectional discourse of transcultural feminism, this introduction aims to investigate the development of women's narratives and to what extent the *Nü sishu* may be argued to be a Chinese feminist response to traditional Confucian teachings from within. Furthermore, to enrich our understanding and to contrast the gender perspectives of the two sexes, we will first look at what Confucian men have said about the opposite sex before we turn our attention to what Confucian women have said about women.

## 2. “The Master Says . . .”: What Did Confucius and Other Confucian Men Say About Women?

### 2.1 Confucius's Encounters with Women

Even though Confucius never directly wrote a treatise on women nor did he formally teach any female students, his encounters with women can still shed light on his view of women. For example, according to historical records such as Kongzi shijia 孔子世家 (“Family Genealogy of Confucius”) in the *Shiji* 《史記》 (*Historical Records*) by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145/139 BCE–87/86 BCE?) and

the *Kongzi jiayu* 《孔子家語》 (*Family Discourse of Confucius*) by Wang Shu 王肅 (195 CE–256 CE), we know that Confucius was born of an aging father Shuliang He 叔梁紇, known for his great physical strength, and Yan Zhengzai 顏徵在, a young lady from a noble family.<sup>5</sup> After Shuliang He's first wife passed away and his second wife did not beget a healthy son to carry on the family name, he married Ms. Yan. A selection from the *Kongzi jiayu* is translated here:

The ancestors of Confucius were the descendants of Song 宋. . . . [After many generations,] Fangsu 防叔 begot Boxia 伯夏. Boxia begot Shuliang He. The record said, "Although Shuliang He had nine daughters, he had no son." . . . Shuliang He therefore made a request of a marriage to the Yan family. The Yan family has three daughters. The youngest is Zhengzai. [After receiving the marriage request,] Mr. Yan, the father, spoke with his three daughters: "Although Sir Shuliang He's father and grandfather were only low-ranking governmental officials, he is a descendent of former sage kings. . . . I am fond of him. Even though he is old and his temperament strict, this is not something to be concerned about. Which one of you would be willing to marry him?" Two older daughters were silent. Zhengzai [, the youngest of the three,] stepped forward and said: "I will be willing to go. Is there any need to inquire further?" Mr. Yan replied: "Only you are able to do it" and married Zhengzai to Shuliang He. . . . Zhengzai then gave birth to Confucius and named him Qiu 丘 and gave him another given name Zhongni 仲尼. When Confucius was three years old, his father . . . passed away. . . . Later, when Confucius was at the age of nineteen, he married Miss Shangguan 上官氏. They had a son Boyu 伯魚.<sup>6</sup>

One learns from this anecdote that Confucius's mother Zhengzai was the youngest of the three Yan daughters. While her two older sisters hesitated, she alone looked past her future husband's old age and married him for his virtue. She became a widow when Confucius was only three years old and single-handedly raised Confucius. It seems unlikely that Confucius, a strong advocate of filial piety with such a close relation to his widowed mother who raised him, would hold a misogynist view against *all* women. Even though we do not know much about Confucius's wife, we do know that together they had a son Boyu, who was known for his love of learning.<sup>7</sup>

When Confucius traveled to various feudal states to promote the Way, he also encountered other women. The *Analects* 6.28 mentions Lady Nanzi 南子, who is known for her exceptional beauty: "When Confucius went to see Nanzi, Zilu 子路 [Confucius's student] was not pleased." Kongzi shijia, in the *Shiji*, provides us with further details about the actual event:

Duke Ling [of Wei 衛] 靈公 had a concubine Nanzi. She sent a messenger to Confucius with the message that “No known gentlemen will insult [their hosts]: if a gentleman desires to become like a brother with my king, he must first come to me, the little king. I, the little king, am willing to receive you.” Confucius declined Nanzi’s request at first, but he later went to see her reluctantly. When the meeting took place, Nanzi stayed behind the curtain. Confucius entered the door, faced north, and bowed. Nanzi returned a bow behind the curtain—her jade jewelries and accessories made many sounds. [Later returning to his residence,] Confucius said: “I wished that I did not have to meet with Lady Nanzi. But since the meeting had to take place, I followed all ritual propriety during our meeting.” Zilu was still displeased. Confucius sighed: “If I did anything contrary to rituals, may Heaven despise me! May Heaven despise me!” Confucius stayed in the State of Wei 衛 for over a month. One day Duke Ling and Lady Nanzi rode in the same carriage in an outing. They made official Yong Qu 雍渠 participate in the ride and asked Confucius to follow in the next carriage. The carriages drove passed the city and market ostentatiously. Confucius lamented: “I have yet to meet someone who desires virtues as much as he desires a woman’s physical beauty.” Feeling ashamed, he left the State of Wei.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, Nanzi was eager to exercise her influence on state affairs—calling herself the “little king” (*xiao jun* 小君) and demanding Confucius to pay honor to her. Having heard that she engaged in inappropriate sexual relations with multiple men, including Duke Ling’s son (a clear violation of proper rituals), Confucius declined the meeting at first; however, with a thin hope to meet with Duke Ling and to persuade him to govern by virtue, he reluctantly met with Nanzi. Confucius eventually left the State of Wei after realizing that Duke Ling was too corrupt to consider humane government. Confucius’s lamentation that “I have yet to meet someone who desires virtues as much as he desires a woman’s physical beauty” would provide the authors of the *Nü sishu* an important foundation in upholding that the real beauty of a woman (*fu rong* 婦容) rests on her inner virtue, not her outward appearance.

## 2.2 Liu Xiang’s *Lienü zhuan* (*Biographies of Women*)

Another important source that informs us about Confucius’s view of women is the *Lienü zhuan* 《列女傳》 (*Biographies of Women*), composed by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 BCE–6 BCE), a court historian and Confucian scholar of the Western Han dynasty.<sup>9</sup> Liu’s *Lienü zhuan*, the first of its genre that has inspired many

other writings of biographies of women in the following two millennia, provides quasi-historical records of 109 women, of which ninety-four are virtuous persons and fifteen are licentious characters.<sup>10</sup> Mencius's mother is among the ninety-four virtuous cases. *Lienü zhuan* originally comprises seven volumes: (1) *Muyi* 母儀 ("Model Motherhood"), (2) *Xianming* 賢明 ("Virtuous Intelligence"), (3) *Renzhi* 仁智 ("Humaneness and Wisdom"), (4) *Zenshun* 貞順 ("Chastity and Obedience"), (5) *Jieyi* 節義 ("Integrity and Righteousness"), (6) *Biantong* 辯通 ("Penetrating Rhetorical Skills"), and (7) *Niebi* 孽嬖 ("The Evil and Spoiled"). Later scholars added another twenty biographies as volume 8, called *Xu lienü zhuan* 續列女傳 ("Supplemental Biographies of Women").

While gender-oppressive practices often derived from ritual traditions, many women in these biographies exercised ritual propriety (*li* 禮) in innovative manners as powerful means to protect their autonomy and to counter the societal and familial pressure of marriage or remarriage. One reads, for example, that a woman of the State of Shen 申 in the Zhaonan 召南 region was about to marry a man of Feng 豐. But her future matrimonial family planned to bring her to the new household without properly following the six marriage rites.<sup>11</sup> She refused the marriage unyieldingly, arguing that the husband–wife relationship is the most fundamental of all human relations. If the root is incorrectly planted, the harm that is done will be insurmountable. Therefore, the marital ritual must be carried out completely and properly. Her future husband's family sued her in court. She firmly stated in response: "If one thing is incomplete or one rite is unprepared, my integrity shall not be compromised because of it. Even if death comes, I shall not marry."<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, one reads that Woman Cai 蔡人之妻, Lady Boying 伯嬴, Widow Taoying of Lu 魯寡陶嬰, and Duke Weixuan's wife 衛宣夫人, among others, exercised personal integrity and ritual propriety in resisting their male suitors' requests, as well as family pressure to remarry.<sup>13</sup> We also learn in the *Lienü zhuan* that many women from different walks of life (whether they were young girls or elderly women) outsmarted men and emperors in political affairs, as well as in military strategy. Some of them—for example, Zhong Lichun 鐘離春, Woman "Large Tumor" (Suliunü 宿瘤女)—were extremely unattractive by conventional standards.<sup>14</sup> By exercising impressive rhetorical skills, these women not only confronted their husbands, sons, and emperors about their misdeeds and short-sightedness but also provided them with wise counsel on how to remedy these problems.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Liu Xiang's real intention may have been to use the *Lienü zhuan* as metaphor to criticize the political corruption of his time by means of citing historical examples of virtuous and licentious women, the value of *Lienü zhuan* in our study of the history and the philosophy of women in the Chinese tradition remains considerable. Furthermore, considering that the *Lienü zhuan* was

composed more than two thousand years ago, it is worth noting that even though Liu Xiang was bound by the ultra-conservative values of *sancong side* 三從四德 (three womanly obediences and four womanly virtues), he was independent enough to author biographies for women and to acknowledge their exemplary wisdom, integrity, intelligence, and talents in the social and political realms.

The *Lienü zhuan* often cites Confucius. Volume 1, *Muyi* (“Model Motherhood”), chapter 9 (Lu Ji Jingjiang 魯季敬姜), for example, recorded that Confucius held Lady Jingjiang of the Ji clan in the State of Lu in high regard. She was the wife of court official Gongfu Mubo 公父穆伯 and the mother of Prime Minister Wenbo 文伯. Commenting on her frugality and diligence even after her son became the prime minister, Confucius said: “My students: remember this. This lady of Ji does not indulge in extravagance.”<sup>16</sup> Lady Jingjiang’s husband died early. Later, when her son passed away, she strongly admonished her daughters-in-law that they should not starve themselves to death and that the funeral must be simple, according to proper rituals. Upon hearing this, Confucius commented: “The wisdom of a young girl is not as great as that of an adult woman, and the wisdom of a young boy is not as good as that of an adult man. Gongfu’s wife is wise. She wants to illuminate her son’s virtue.”<sup>17</sup> Lady Jingjiang mourned her husband in the morning and her son in the evening. Confucius heard about this and again praised her for knowing ritual, expressing affection without bias, and handling affairs with proper order.<sup>18</sup> Volume 6, *Biantong* (“Penetrating Rhetorical Skills”), chapter 6 (Agu chunü 阿谷處女), recorded that Confucius and his students encountered a young girl who was washing clothes in a mountain valley. Confucius sent his student, Zigong 子貢, to initiate a conversation. This young girl handled their questions calmly and wisely. According to the record, Confucius praised her: “This woman understands human feelings and proper ritual.”<sup>19</sup> In both accounts, these women were praised for their wisdom and virtue, *not* for their domestic skills. In addition, Confucius advised his students (all male) to take note and learn from these women. Contrary to received opinion, these episodes support an *alternative* reading of Confucian philosophy of women—namely that women’s intelligence was not necessarily frowned upon in early Confucianism. Rather, strong character, argumentative talent, and reasoning ability in a woman were valued just as highly as her skills in household management.

Nonetheless, one may still take issue with certain statements that were historically attributed to Confucius. There is, for example, the much-debated *Analects* 8.20:

[Sage King] Shun 舜 had five ministers and all under Heaven was well governed, and King Wu 武王 [of Zhou 周] said: “I have ten ministers

who are skilled in government.” Master Kong commented: “Is it not true that talent is hard to find? At the time of Shun’s accession things are thought to have flourished, and with a woman among King Wu’s ministers, there were in fact only nine men [alternatively, ministers].”<sup>20</sup>

And, the infamous *Analects* 17.23:

Only women (*nüzi* 女子, alternatively concubines or young girls) and morally inferior men (*xiaoren* 小人, or servants,) seem difficult to care for. If you keep them close, they become insubordinate; but if you keep them at a distance, they become resentful.<sup>21</sup>

It is easier, in my view, to defend *Analects* 8.20 than to defend *Analects* 17.23. One could argue that 8.20 is not necessarily a sexist statement. What Confucius meant was to point out that out of the ten ministers employed by King Wu, one was a woman or that a woman does not amount to a minister in the traditional sense whose role is essentially to administer “external” affairs while a woman’s role is to manage “internal” affairs. This is a restatement of the codified division of labor. Thus, King Wu of Zhou only had nine ministers. *Analects* 17.23, however, is much more difficult to explain away. Even if one interprets this passage more charitably (taking *nüzi* as referring to concubines or young girls, not women in general), it is still puzzling why no similar comments are made about men or young boys.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to Confucius and Liu Xiang, what did other Confucians say about women and how did they influence society’s perception of women?

### 2.3 Dong Zhongshu’s Radical Transformation of Early Confucianism

Early Confucianism underwent a radical transformation in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) due to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179 BCE–104 BCE). Dong was not only a scholar but also a chief minister to Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 140 BCE–87 BCE). He played an instrumental role to convince Emperor Wu in making Confucianism the state philosophy (or, better, ideology) of Han in 136 BCE. But Dong’s Confucianism was *not* the Confucianism presented by Confucius or Mencius; rather, it was deeply entrenched in the *Yinyang Wuxing* 陰陽五行 theory. For instance, a theoretical and political move of “honoring *yang*, denigrating *yin*” occurred in Han’s attempt to legitimize its political authority as a mandate of Heaven, after defeating the short-lived Qin 秦 dynasty (221 BCE–207 BCE), by means of aligning Han with *yang* (and the earth, or fire, element) and distancing itself from Qin, which identified itself with *yin* (and the

water element).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, based on classical Confucian texts before the early Han, the personal, the familial, the social, and the political are regarded as correlated concentric circles moving toward the goal of what Roger T. Ames calls a “radial and centripetal harmony.”<sup>24</sup> Concurrently, the reciprocal familial relationships rooted in *ren* 仁 (humaneness) and their correspondingly manifested virtues are regarded as normative models for relations in the comparatively more distant public realm. Dong replaced these reciprocal relationships, best known in the form of Mencius’s “five relationships” (*wulun*) (*Mencius* 3A:4), “there should be affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, proper order between the old and the young, and trustworthiness between friends” with the autocratic and patriarchal “three bonds” (*sangong* 三綱)—namely “the authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife,”<sup>25</sup> by identifying the minister, the son, and the wife with *yin*.

This hierarchical alignment of *yang* with ruler/father/male/husband and *yin* with subject/son/female/wife only began in the Han dynasty, and *not* in any of the earlier ancient or Confucian texts. Formerly, *yin* and *yang* were presented as a contrasting but interdependent and complementary pair: *yin* (the shady side of a hill, rain, clouds, contraction, stillness, receptive force, etc.) and *yang* (the sunny side of a hill, dryness, sun, expansion, movement, active force, etc.).<sup>26</sup> *Yin* and *yang* were different but equal.<sup>27</sup> Dong’s school of Confucianism, often called Han Confucianism, departs from the classic reading of the *yin–yang* relation as two co-relative and mutually generating, complementary, interdependent, and transformational paradigms in favor of a bleak hierarchical and oppositional interpretation. For example, Dong writes: “one should esteem *yang* and despise *yin*.”<sup>28</sup> Han Confucianism deploys this recast *yin–yang* theory not merely to reinterpret natural phenomena but, more importantly, to justify the sociopolitical domination by the ruler, the father, and the husband over the minister, the son, and the wife, as both a law of nature and a mandate from Heaven. Dong’s *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 《春秋繁露》), chapter 43 (“*Yang* the Venerable, *Yin* the Lowly”), expresses this politicized *yin–yang* metaphysics just as much:

[W]hen counting days, one bases it on day, not on night. When counting years, one bases it on *yang*, not on *yin*. . . . [T]his is using Heaven’s way as the measurement. A husband is *yang* even if he is base; a wife is *yin* even if she is noble. . . . The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, therefore, does not call out rulers’ shortcomings nor does it speak of the ministers-subjects’ merits. All merits belong to the rulers; all shortcomings belong to the ministers-subjects. . . . Hence, a filial son’s conduct and a loyal

minister's righteousness all model after Earth. Earth serves Heaven just like how those of the lower position serve those of the higher position. . . . Everything bad is *yin*; everything good is *yang*. . . . Thus, it is said, *yang* is Heaven's virtue, and *yin* Heaven's punishment. *Yang qi* is warm, while *yin qi* is cold; *yang qi* gives, while *yin qi* takes; *yang qi* is humane, while *yin qi* is hostile.

Chapter 53 ("Basic Meaning") further adds:

The righteous meaning of the ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife relations is all taken from the way of *yin* and *yang*. The ruler is *yang* and the minister[-subject] is *yin*; the father is *yang* and the son is *yin*; the husband is *yang* and the wife is *yin*. The way of *yin* cannot act on its own: neither can it arise on its own at the beginning, nor can it share merits at the end.

The politically motivated "three bonds" and its concomitant symbolic control embedded in the authoritarian "husband, the ruler" vis-à-vis "wife, the subject" over the reciprocal Mencian five relationships is thus fully solidified in Han Confucianism, placing the subject, the son, and the wife in uncompromising subservient roles. The Han and later dynasties all suffered from this ominous reversal of paradigms. Owing to its historical proximity, Dong Zhongshu's influence is most evident in Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women* (even in her choice of chapter titles).

#### 2.4 Neo-Confucians and Zhu Xi on Women

The movement of Neo-Confucianism, a Confucian revival and response to the challenges posed by the popularity of Buddhism and Daoism, began in the ninth century with Han Yu (768–824) and Li Ao (772–841), reached its climate in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, and continued in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) through the early twentieth century. Neo-Confucians absorbed and syncretized (while criticizing) multiple Buddhist and Daoist elements into the Confucian apparatus, purged Confucianism of superstitions, and reestablished Confucianism as a school of rational thought equipped with practical moral and social philosophy and backed by a sophisticated metaphysics. Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism is generally regarded as a hyper-conservative philosophy and, as Tak-Ling Terry Woo has insightfully noted, its syncretism gravely undermined diversity and pluralism and put greater restrictions on women than its preceding dynasties.<sup>29</sup> Repudiation of widow remarrying depicted in Cheng

Yi's 程頤 (1033–1107) infamous statement: “to starve to death is a very small matter[;] [t]o lose one's integrity, however, is a very serious matter” well illustrates Song Neo-Confucians' conservative view on women's chastity.<sup>30</sup> Not all Song Neo-Confucians however, Julia Ching reminds us, held the same position. For instance, famous Song scholars and reformers Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) and Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) held somewhat more liberal positions in comparison to Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).<sup>31</sup> And, *not* all women were expected to adhere to such a high moral mandate. Even Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi (the most conservative of Song scholars) demonstrated flexibility in applying their ideas to real-life situations. For example, contrary to his declaration that a widow should not remarry, Cheng Yi praised his father for arranging the remarriage of a widowed grandniece.<sup>32</sup> Zhu Xi also was less rigid in his treatment of *real* women (vs. idealized women). A case in point is that, contrary to his student's stricter opinion, Zhu supported the ruling of a local magistrate in allowing a woman, following her parents' wishes, to return to her natal home because “her husband was too poor to support her.”<sup>33</sup> Integrity was regarded as a paramount virtue by the Neo-Confucians. Under the influence of Neo-Confucianism, women's chastity as a gendered expression of integrity gradually became not just one of the many essential virtues (as in previous dynasties) but also the very epitome of female virtues. Promulgated by the widely implemented governmental honoring system (*jingbiao* 旌表), chastity gained even great fervor among Ming–Qing women.

In terms of his impact on China and Chinese cultural regions, Zhu Xi is easily ranked first among Neo-Confucians of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. He is best known for his selection and commentary on the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 《四書》), which were used as the standard textbooks in preparation for the imperial civil service examinations from 1313 to 1905. In addition, Ming Taizu (the founding emperor of Ming) relied on Zhu Xi's philosophy to restore social order and morality after the fall of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Zhu's influence was especially pronounced in the Ming dynasty—a historical period during which two of the women authors of the *Nü sishu* lived. Zhu's Neo-Confucianism focuses particularly on moral cultivation. Following Confucius and especially Mencius, Zhu Xi affirms the innate goodness in human nature and the effect of habits. He distinguishes “original nature” (endowed good nature) from “physical nature” (nature affected by external conditions):

[O]riginal nature is perfectly good. This is the nature described by Mencius as “good.” . . . However, it will be obstructed if [our] physical

nature contains impurity. . . . When we speak of the physical nature, we refer to principle [*li* 理] and [psycho-physical] force [*qi* 氣] combined.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the purpose of “learning is to transform this material endowment.”<sup>35</sup> For this reason, Zhu Xi also encourages women’s learning so that they can become virtuous models for their children, relatives, and villagers. In the *Zhuzi yulei* 《朱子語類》 (*Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi*), where elementary learning for children was discussed, a student asked: “Since girls should also be educated, in addition to teaching them the *Classic of Filial Piety*, how about also teaching them selections from the *Analects* that are clear and easy to understand?” Zhu Xi replied: “That will do. Ban Zhao’s *Lessons for Women* and Sima Guang’s *Family Precepts* are good too.”<sup>36</sup>

He upheld women’s equal capacity to achieve the paramount Confucian virtue of humaneness.<sup>37</sup> The subjects, however, were limited because Zhu Xi still sees the inner–outer distinction between men and women as a weighty ritual mandate, and obedience as women’s primary virtue.<sup>38</sup>

Still influenced by the Han Confucians’ *yin-yang* hierarchy that was so ingrained in the Song consciousness, Zhu Xi’s teaching on the *yin-yang* relation was one of inconsistency. On the one hand, following Zhou Dunyi’s *Taijitu shuo* 《太極圖說》 (*Explanations of the Diagram of the Supreme/Great Ultimate*), he upholds the complementarity of *yang*/activity/male and *yin*/tranquility/female. On the other hand, women are construed unfairly as the inferior sex because of their *yin* nature. He states in his *Reflections on Things at Hand*: “Between man and woman, there is an order of superiority and inferiority, and between husband and wife, there is the principle of who leads and who follows. This is a constant principle.”<sup>39</sup> In the *Further Reflections on Things at Hand*, women are advised to strictly adhere to their domestic roles:

To do wrong is unbecoming to a wife, and to do good is also unbecoming to a wife. A woman is merely to be obedient to what is proper. If a daughter does nothing wrong, that is enough. If she does good, then likewise, that is neither a favorable nor a desirable thing. Only spirits and food are her concern, and not to occasion sorrow to her parents is all that is called for.<sup>40</sup>

Because family plays such an important role in a Confucian society, enculturation of obedience to authority often begins in the household. The political purpose of “three bonds” and subordination of women to men is clear when mapped against the “husband-ruler” and “wife-subject” symbolism. How does one free Confucianism from the distortion that began in the Han dynasty and continues