

FEMALE POWER IN SUBMISSION:

DECIPHERING BAN ZHAO'S *ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN* AND
MEN'S MANIPULATION OF WOMEN'S WRITINGS

HANG DIEU NGUYEN

HONORS THESIS FOR EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

ADVISERS: HONGCHU FU & YANHONG ZHU
SPECIAL THANKS TO PROFESSOR BELLO

SUBMITTED: MARCH 15, 2013

INTRODUCTION

She completed the tables of *Han shu* left by Ban Gu;
Her appeal moved the emperor to summon back Ban Chao.
Lamentable that she passed down the *Admonitions for Women*;
“To be humble and weak,” she has misled us for centuries.¹

Ya Hua, 1907

Ban Zhao (班昭, 45-114 C.E.) is the first woman historian and one of the most renowned female scholars of Eastern Han. Along with her father Ban Biao (班彪, 3 CE- 54 CE) and brother Ban Gu (班固, 32-92), she finished the *Book of Han* (漢書), a history collection of Western Han period, and wrote numerous literary pieces, including the renowned work *Admonitions for Women* (女誡). The cited poem, written in 1907 by a writer named Ya Hua, was specifically addressed to Ban Zhao as one of the six “Odes to Women in History.”² The short poem successfully summarizes modern critics’ perspectives on Ban Zhao: it acknowledges her remarkable talents and enormous contributions, yet at the same time harshly criticizes Ban Zhao for her work *Admonitions for Women*. Ya Hua uses the strong word “lamentable” to highlight the condemnation of Ban Zhao’s *Admonitions for Women*, mourning how a well-respected and influential figure like Ban Zhao could possibly compose such a detrimental and misleading creation. As the title “Admonitions for Women” suggests, the text provides Ban Zhao’s instructions for women, particularly married women, to attain “domestic harmony” through

¹ Translation taken from Xiaohong Xia, “New Meanings In a Classic: Differing Interpretations of Ban Zhao and Her *Admonitions for Women* in the Late Qing Dynasty,” in *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, ed. J Tao, B Zheng, and S L Mow (New York: Feminist Press, 2004), 11.

² Ibid.

theme of women's submission.³ The text is comprised of seven chapters, including "Humility," "Husband and Wife," "Respect and Caution," "Womanly Qualifications," "Whole-Hearted Devotion," "Implicit Obedience," and "Harmony with Younger Brothers- and Sisters-in-law." According to Robin Wang, *Admonitions for Women* was the first work "exclusively intended for the education of Chinese women."⁴

In 1624, Wang Xiang (王相), a Confucian male scholar during Ming Dynasty, edited and incorporated *Admonitions for Women* into the collection *Four Books for Women* (女四書), which marked a significant turn for the text's influence on traditional Chinese women. Since then, *Admonitions for Women*, as included in *Four Books for Women*, "constituted required reading for the daughters of all upper-class families" until the late Qing Dynasty.⁵ The text thus gained immense prominence, because "just as every literate man started his education with that *Four Books*, every literate woman began hers with the *Four Books for Women*."⁶ More precisely, *Admonitions for Women* became men's tool to oppress women and fortify female inferiority through means of education. For this very reason, when the notion of gender equality started to emerge in the early twentieth century, *Admonitions for Women* became the center of attack from modern critics such as Ya Hua and He Zhen for promoting gender inequality and "misleading women for centuries."⁷

However, such criticisms of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* are merely based on superficial readings of the text and undue application of modern gender standards. Critics take

³ Robin Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty* (Hackett, 2003), 177.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 80.

⁶ Lily X.H Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women* (Wild Peony, 1994), 23.

⁷ See poem, Ya Hua

the work out of its context and use modern standards to judge a work of more than 2000 years ago, which easily results in a biased and incomplete view on the text. They fail to take into account the Han social context and inherent tension within Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women*, which otherwise suggest a different interpretation of the work. Specifically, there are inconsistencies between Ban Zhao's "elevated position and independent activities" and "the [submissive] lessons she left to later generations of women."⁸ The text also presents potential conflicts between Ban Zhao's writing and Wang Xiang's annotation and compilation of the text into *Four Books for Women*. In other words, Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* is a perfect example of the conflict between women's writing and men's manipulation of the text for Confucian teaching in traditional China.

This thesis revisits Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* and seeks to provide a fresh, more complete perspective into Ban Zhao's work in relation to the edited version by Wang Xiang in *Four Books for Women*. Particularly, I argue that Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* responds to the Confucian society in the Eastern Han period and serves women's interests by providing practical guideline to help women avoid troubles and survive the traditional society. On the other hand, Wang Xiang interprets and manipulates the text to fortify Confucian ideals of "women's virtues." My thesis will explore such tension between women's writing and men's manipulation to shed light on the development of gender structure from Eastern Han to late Ming dynasty.

⁸ W L Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 33.

BAN ZHAO AND ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN

Ban Zhao was born into an elite family with a scholarly standing. Her father, Ban Biao, served as an official during the Eastern Han Dynasty. He was better known for his scholarship and historical works, including “narrative poems, expositions, treatises, historical records, memorials, in all enough to fill nine books.”⁹ Her brother, Ban Gu, was also a prolific scholar and official. He wrote numerous literary works and was greatly favored by the emperor, as “every time the emperor went out to travel or to hunt, Ban Gu offered poems and essays of praise. And whenever the court had a big conference the emperor ordered him to propound questions for debate by the officials.”¹⁰ He also composed the *Book of Han*, which consisted of four parts: “Chronicles,” “Biographies,” “Treatises,” and “Tables.”¹¹ Later when Ban Gu passed away, Ban Zhao completed the Tables and composed the “Treatise on Astronomy” for the *Book of Han*.¹²

With such an advantageous background, Ban Zhao received elite education and scholarly learning from her parents since an early age. Indeed, Ban Zhao “acknowledges her indebtedness to her scholarly father, and speaks of a cultured mother upon whom she relied for literary instruction as well as training in good manners.”¹³ At the age of 14, she married Cao Shishu, and when her husband died she chose not to remarry and dedicated her life to erudition. Regarding Ban Zhao’s talents and knowledge, Fan Ye wrote that “[Ban Zhao] displayed profound erudition and talent of a high order,”¹⁴ with a prolific collection of “Narrative Poems, Commemorative Writings, Inscriptions, Eulogies, Argumentations, Commentaries, Elegies,

⁹ Nancy L Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

Essays, Treatises, Expositions, Memorials, and Final Instructions, in all (enough to fill) sixteen books.”¹⁵ She was greatly admired by Emperor He (漢和帝, r. 88-105), who ordered her to serve as instructor for the royal empresses and concubines. One of Ban Zhao’s notable imperial disciples was Empress Deng Sui (鄧綏), who later reigned over the country after Emperor He passed away. Therefore, as an imperial instructor, Ban Zhao gained indirect political influence on the country, as “[w]hen the empress Deng became regent (106 A.D.) she conferred with Ban Zhao concerning affairs of state.”¹⁶ Indeed, Nancy Lee Swann noted that Ban Zhao “was one of those numerous women of strong mind who have played a striking part on the stage of Chinese history,” and that “although primarily a woman of letters she could also play a leading part in the politics of the court.”¹⁷ Therefore, Ban Zhao held a prominent position in both the literary and political spheres of Eastern Han, the fields that were conventionally exclusive to men only.

As one can see from her lifetime achievements, Ban Zhao is an empowered woman who exerts notable influence on both the literary and political realms. She was mostly known for her scholarship but indeed enjoyed political power to some extent. Such an independent and powerful career inherently contradicts the lesson of female subordination in her work *Admonitions for Women*.¹⁸ Ban Zhao composed *Admonitions for Women* around the age of 54 and addressed the text to her unmarried daughters, who “have not learned the proper customs for married women.”¹⁹ However, as her own daughters most likely had already been married by then, *Admonitions for Women* indeed “intended for an audience far beyond Ban’s immediate

¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 33.

¹⁹ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 179.

family.”²⁰ Considering the fact that Ban Zhao served as the imperial instructor for empresses and concubines, she most plausibly directed the text at the royal or upper class daughters, who were more likely to achieve literacy and thus benefit from the education of *Admonitions for Women* than those from lower class. *Admonitions for Women* is arguably Ban Zhao’s most prominent work²¹ and “may well be the first Chinese prose tract of wifely duties.”²² The text provides detailed instructions regarding the proper behaviors for a married woman and emphasizes on female submission and devoted commitment to “gain the love of her husband.”²³

The conflict between Ban Zhao’s influential achievements and *Admonitions for Women’s* lesson of women’s submission thus suggests a different interpretation of the text that better account for Ban Zhao’s wisdom and empowerment: a subtle guidance on an “outward appearance” of humility and proper behavior to serve women’s interest.²⁴ It is also worth noting that Ban Zhao was revered as an exemplary woman of virtues and morality, while gaining lofty position and political influence without provoking attack from the male dominant society. Therefore, the accounts of her life suggest that Ban Zhao might have applied such principles of humility and virtues to her own advantage. The following exploration of the text’s literary reception and analysis of the social context for *Admonitions for Women* will further elucidate the understanding of the text.

²⁰ Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 122.

²¹ Xia, “New Meanings In a Classic: Differing Interpretations of Ban Zhao and Her Admonitions for Women in the Late Qing Dynasty,” 4.

²² Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 33.

²³ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 187.

²⁴ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 124.

LITERARY CRITIQUES OF BAN ZHAO'S *ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN*

The literary reception of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* before the Ming dynasty publication of *Four Books for Women* remains controversial. In her book *Women in Early Imperial China*, Bret Hinsch argues that *Admonitions for Women* was "widely read from the Eastern Han onward,"²⁵ which connotes the text's extensive popularity as soon as the text came out. This argument is not completely unfounded, considering the fact that Ma Rong (馬融), a well-known scholar during Eastern Han period, deeply admired *Admonitions for Women* and even had his wives and daughters study the text.²⁶ However, it remains uncertain whether the text's popularity went beyond Ma Rong's favorable reception. In fact, according to Yuen Ting Lee, *Admonitions for Women* were "too difficult for the women of the time to read and Han scholars generally neglected it."²⁷ However, Y. T. Lee argues that the text "resurfaced in Tang and Song China" and "became increasingly popular amongst even ordinary women" during the periods.²⁸ Again, this argument can be justified by the fact that during Tang dynasty, Song Ruoxin (宋若莘) and Song Ruozhao (宋若昭) published the book *Women's Analects* (女論語), which "was written in the powerful voice of the historical Ban Zhao" and "developed the basic view of the four womanly virtues" in *Admonitions for Women*.²⁹ Nevertheless, since little is known about the popularity of *Women's Analects* during Tang dynasty, it is hard to positively determine *Admonitions for Women's* popularity during Tang and Song dynasty based on the emergence of the *Women's Analects*. Indeed, Lily Xiao Hong Lee assertively claims that

²⁵ Ibid., 122.

²⁶ Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*, 23.

²⁷ Yuen Ting Lee, "Ban Zhao: Scholar of Han Dynasty China," *World History Connected*, February 2012, <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/9.1/lee.html>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Admonitions for Women did not gain noteworthy attention until it was incorporated into Wang Xiang's *Four Books for Women*. With these scholarly disagreements and a lack of reliable resources, therefore, the popularity and influence of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* from Han to Ming dynasty remains uncertain.

However, literary scholars seem to agree on the tremendous influence and attention that *Admonitions for Women* received since the publication of the *Four Books for Women* in Ming dynasty. As part of the *Four Books for Women*, the text achieved widespread prominence, with “more and more women expected to conform to the idealistic pattern delineated by Ban Zhao.”³⁰ *Admonitions for Women* retained its eminence even until late Qing dynasty, when the first school for women, China Girls' School, was established in 1897. *The Four Books for Women* became the core curriculum for the school to “serve as an introduction to women's enlightenment, so that they will follow the path of women's virtue all their lives and fulfill their duty of women's work.”³¹ Therefore, from Ming dynasty through the late Qing Dynasty, *Admonitions for Women* was a “model for women's education” and its author, Ban Zhao, was also greatly revered as the female “substitute for Confucius.”³²

As the emerging modernization and the widespread Reform Movement in 1898 gave rise to the modern ideas of feminism and gender equality, late Qing Dynasty started to witness a literary struggle and ambivalence towards Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women*. At the early transitional period from traditional society to modernity, some scholars made great efforts to defend *Admonitions for Women* in light of modernity by reconciling its instructions of subordination with the enlightened notions of gender equality. For example, Qiu Yufang, a

³⁰ Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*, 23.

³¹ Xia, “New Meanings In a Classic: Differing Interpretations of Ban Zhao and Her Admonitions for Women in the Late Qing Dynasty,” 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

scholar of the period, argued that *Admonitions for Women* was progressive and laudable because it promoted education for women. Qiu Yufang backed up her argument by “pick[ing] and choos[ing] certain sentences that supported her argument and highlight them, while ignoring the main theme of the work that contradicted these ideas.”³³ Needless to say, such struggle to reconcile between *Admonitions for Women* and modern notions of gender equality did not sustain for long, since “[m]odern ideas about equality between the sexes stand in direct contradiction to the teachings of Ban Zhao’s *Admonitions for Women*.”³⁴ At Shanghai Patriotic Girls’ School during early twentieth century, instructor Ye Han gave a lecture attacking *Admonitions for Women* and *Four Books for Women* for “teach[ing] women how to be dependent, immature and submissive to men.”³⁵ In 1907, He Zhen, an active feminist during the time, fiercely denounced Ban Zhao as “traitor Ban,” claiming that “[Ban Zhao] left a legacy of shame to womankind, teaching women to be the servants of men. She is a great traitor to women.”³⁶ He Zhen criticized Ban Zhao for blindly complying with Confucianism and “acting as an accomplice to the evil teachings of Confucianism.”³⁷ From He Zhen’s viewpoint, *Admonitions for Women* is a crime against women committed by Ban Zhao and Confucianism, advocating female inferiority in Chinese society and causing suffering of traditional Chinese women.

Whether traditional views exalt Ban Zhao as “the Confucius of women,”³⁸ or modern critics disparage her for blindly conforming to Confucianism, they are essentially both misleading in the view that Ban Zhao is completely devoted to Confucian ideals and that her work *Admonitions for Women* is a product of Confucianism. This is not to say that Ban Zhao is

³³ Ibid., 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

³⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

entirely free of any Confucian influence: living in a Confucian dominant society, she inevitably adopts certain Confucian values and ideologies in her philosophies. However, her acceptance of Confucian hierarchy as a social fact does not necessarily mean that she is a blind follower of Confucianism and endorses male dominance against women's interests. In fact, exploration of Ban Zhao's writings reveals that Ban Zhao adopts Confucianism in a way that empowers herself as a woman, and her motivation and ambition indicated in her literary works suggest that *Admonitions for Women* aims to serve women's interest rather than advocating female inferiority. The late nineteenth century struggle to reconcile between *Admonitions for Women* and modern gender equality failed because it attempted to defend the text entirely within the modern context. In order to provide an accurate and fair interpretation, one needs to analyze *Admonitions for Women* within its own social context and take into account the male editors' manipulations of the text for Confucianism teaching purposes. Despite her criticisms of Ban Zhao, Lily Lee has a point when she writes that "Ban Zhao did not intend, nor could she foresee, that centuries later her precepts would start a trend which would develop and snowball into the man-eatings rites and teachings."³⁹ Although Lily Lee did not explicitly state the cause of this trend, the sentence highly suggests the existence of a manipulative factor that transformed the text into "a man-eating rites and teachings." The following exploration of Ban Zhao's response to the Confucian hierarchy in Han society and analysis of *Admonitions for Women's* social context will provide a different interpretation of the text and cast light on men's manipulation of female writings.

³⁹ In her book, Lily X.H. Lee criticizes Ban Zhao for inflicting constraints on Chinese women. Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*, 24.

BAN ZHAO – A CONFUCIAN THINKER?

The Han dynasty witnessed a “victory of Confucianism” over other philosophical frameworks such as Daoism and Legalism.⁴⁰ Its preceding empire, Qin dynasty, “used legalist practices to bring about the unification of China,”⁴¹ yet the cruel and ruthless practice adopted by Qin dynasty did not appeal to the people and thus inevitably brought about the fall of the dynasty. Learning from Qin dynasty’s mistake, Han dynasty therefore adopted Confucianism “as the state doctrine” with an aim to sustain the “peace and stability” in the society.⁴² One of the most important frameworks that Confucianism in Han period built upon was the theory of yin and yang (陰陽). During Han dynasty, yin-yang was used to account for the division between “Heaven and Earth, day and night, male and female, ... , superior and inferior, motion and stillness, hardness and softness.”⁴³ In terms of gender, the interaction between yin and yang, which is “both opposite and complementary,”⁴⁴ embodies the relationship between male and female. Like yin and yang, men and women “complement each other but not in strictly equal ways.”⁴⁵ Therefore, according to Ebrey, “[t]he natural relationship between yin and yang is the reason that men lead and women follow.”⁴⁶

Beyond the existing yin-yang framework, Confucianism during the Han dynasty also developed the doctrine of Three Bonds (三綱), which was apparently missing in pre-Han

⁴⁰ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75.

⁴¹ Shuxian Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming* (Greenwood Press, 1998), 102.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bo Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 271.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁴⁵ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Women in Traditional China," *Asia Society*, <http://asiasociety.org/countries/traditions/women-traditional-china>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Confucianism. The Three Bonds principle refers to the relationships between the ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife.⁴⁷ Such relationships were “based on dominance/subservience” and acted “as an inviolable principle for maintain social order.”⁴⁸ The Three Bonds principle thus is different from the pre-Han Confucianism, which emphasized the “rectification of name”⁴⁹ and mutuality in relationships rather than hierarchy. Specifically, the “rectification of name” holds that one needs to fulfill one’s own duty and obligation, whether one is a ruler, commoner, male or female. If an official fulfills his duty, he needs to attain the deserved respect from the emperor.⁵⁰ Unlike such pre-Han ideals of mutual relationships, Confucianism during the Han Dynasty promoted “one-way relationship by putting emphasis on loyalty, filial piety, and subservience.”⁵¹ Women were expected to be dominated “the same way the ruler dominates his ministers and the father dominates his sons.”⁵² As a result, the hierarchy in terms of gender and the expectations of female subordination grew more pronounced during the Han dynasty.

Ban Zhao accepts such gender hierarchy as a social fact, as evidenced by her adoption of the yin-yang concept in *Admonitions for Women*. She bases her arguments of how women should behave on the inherent difference between male and female. Specifically, she claims that “[a]s yin and yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristic. The distinctive quality of yang is rigidity; the function of yin is yielding. A man is honored for

⁴⁷Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*, 102.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 44.

⁵¹ Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*, 109.

⁵² Tongzu Qu, *Han Social Structure* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 50.

strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.”⁵³ However, the fact that Ban Zhao adopts such yin-yang concept in gender differentiation does not necessarily mean that she advocates gender discrimination and promotes female inferiority against the women’s interests. In fact, considering the social realities of the Han dynasty at the time, women’s submission is a clever way to attain husband’s affection and get around the gender hierarchy. According to Patricia Ebrey, “[b]y the end of the Han period, the Confucian vocabulary for talking about women, their natures, their weaknesses, and their proper roles and virtues was largely established.”⁵⁴ In the patriarchal family, the hierarchical role of women was clearly defined. Men were the “head and ruler of a family,”⁵⁵ and women were expected to “serve [their] husband’s parents as carefully and dutifully as [they] served their husband.”⁵⁶ The social realities of husband and parents-in-law’s dominant influence on a woman’s happiness thus justifies Ban Zhao’s emphasis on the women’s outward subservience, as the fulfillment of duties towards husband and her harmony with the husband’s side will secure a woman’s happiness in her marital life. The fact that Ban Zhao herself had some discord with her sister-in-law makes such instructions more personal, and suggests that her personal experience might have motivated Ban Zhao to provide women with advice on avoiding such conflicts and disharmony.⁵⁷ Therefore, in *Admonitions for Women*, Ban Zhao wisely accepts the gender hierarchy as a social fact, yet at the same time provides instructions to get around the hierarchy to secure happiness for women and use female submission to the advantage of women.

⁵³ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

⁵⁴ Ebrey, "Women in Traditional China."

⁵⁵ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁷ According to the book, Ban Zhao did not seem to get along with her sister-in-law, and the sister-in-law herself showed criticism of Ban Zhao’s *Admonitions for Women*. Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 34.

While Ban Zhao accepts Confucian ideals of women's subordination as a social reality, she adopts Confucian values to convey female empowerment in her philosophies. Throughout her literary works, Ban Zhao demonstrates herself as a motivated and ambitious individual. For example, in the poem "Rhapsody on a Journey to the East" (東征賦), Ban Zhao expresses her regret for "being afraid of the journey which lay before her and which would bring her to a new life in a strange place."⁵⁸

"I then lifted my foot and climbed into the carriage
And that night we lodged in the town of Yanshi
Leaving our friends there, we headed for strangers,
My mind was disturbed and my heart full of grief.
By the time dawn broke, I'd still not been able to sleep,
And my lingering heart still refused to obey."⁵⁹

Ban Zhao reveals her grief and sorrow as she has to leave behind her friends and the old home. However, as the journey progresses, Ban Zhao gradually conquers original fear, summons the determination to follow her goal and realizes the "Way (道) of Life."⁶⁰

"We continued on our journey and forged ahead,
I allowed my eyes to roam, my spirits to soar."

And:

"The Classics and Canons teach only one thing:
The Way and its virtue, humanity and wisdom."

"Know that both your nature and fate rest with Heaven,
You must rely on your own great efforts to achieve humanity.
Maintain your lofty vision and follow after brilliance,
Exhaust your loyalty and forgiveness on behalf of others."

She expresses great ambition and motivation, and that "regrets for things left behind, longing for home, must not be permitted to hinder one from pushing on to the goal which is

⁵⁸ Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.*, 140.

⁵⁹ Translation taken from Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 23.

⁶⁰ Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.*, 141.

ahead.”⁶¹ For her, even though one’s fate lies in Heaven’s mandate, one must never cease in the pursuit of wisdom and self-improvement, exerting one’s own efforts to realize the goal of “humanity.” She embraces the Confucian values as the goal and Way of life: “virtue, humanity and wisdom.” However, it is important to note that such Confucian ideal ambitions of a good man (君子) were traditionally intended for *men* only. Women were rarely subjects of worthy attention in classical Chinese canons. Therefore, the fact that Ban Zhao acknowledges such values for herself inherently signifies the notion of gender equity and female empowerment that went beyond the contemporary philosophies. In “Rhapsody on a Journey to the East,” Ban Zhao employs the figure of a journey as a metaphor for difficulties in life that challenge one to get out of comfort zone to realize one’s goal. The concept of “leaving home” and such notions of ambition indeed contradict the traditional idea of women’s restriction to domestic sphere and implied the female emancipation.

Therefore, on one hand, Ban Zhao can be considered a Confucian thinker since she adopts Confucian values in her philosophies to some extent. On the other hand, however, further exploration of Ban Zhao’s writings indicates that she goes beyond the contemporary Confucian framework to establish female empowerment in her philosophies. It is thus reasonable to conclude that in *Admonitions for Women*, Ban Zhao understands the social realities of gender hierarchy and wisely uses Confucian ideals of women’s subordination to the advantage of women. The following analysis of *Admonitions for Women*’s social context will address some of the most common scholarly arguments against the text and further illustrate the interpretation of *Admonitions for Women*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF *ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN*

A Chaotic Society and the Threat to Women

Admonitions for Women was conceived out of a chaotic time when imperial empresses “became more involved in court politics than ever.”⁶² According to Bret Hinsch, “changes in the Han’s dynasty’s basic institutions gave empresses dowager more leverage over the government,”⁶³ and empresses had the opportunity to seize power and exert dominant influence over the imperial life. Empresses acquired power either by becoming regent for a young emperor, or by maneuvering weak emperors to “legitimize their own authority.”⁶⁴ In fact, at the zenith of the empress dowagers’ influence, “nine out of thirteen emperors were mere puppets.”⁶⁵ A renowned quintessence of empresses’ dominance during Han dynasty is the rule of Empress Dowager Lü (呂太后) after emperor Gaozu (高祖, r. 202 B.C. – 195 B.C.) passed away. Empress Dowager Lü “acted as regent of the youthful Emperor Hui”⁶⁶ but actually “ruled as an emperor”⁶⁷ over the country. She retained the political power by employing a “cruel and domineering” policy towards anyone who showed objections.⁶⁸ By the late Han dynasty, there were quite a few similar cases of empresses attaining power over the imperial realm through such harsh and oppressive means. Therefore, Han dynasty witnessed an emphasis on “majesty of imperial institutions”⁶⁹ and empresses’ ambitious desire for the throne that could easily lead to a chaotic battle for power in the inner quarters.

⁶² Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 73.

⁶⁹ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 102.

Indeed, the imperial palace saw the rise of “numerous intrigues, black magic, and accusation” as a result of this struggle for power.⁷⁰ Royal concubines competed with each other for the empress position, and could even “resort to assassination or other forms of intrigue to upset the usual order and have the son declared ruler.”⁷¹ Empresses, on the other hand, also employed brutal means to “prevent [these concubines] from rising to power.”⁷² For example, during the reign of Emperor An (漢安帝, r. 106-125), Empress Yan Ji (閹姬) “murdered Palace Maid Li who had given birth to the heir apparent”⁷³ to prevent Palace Maid Li from gaining imperial influence as the mother of the heir apparent and preserve her own power as an empress. The situation exacerbated when the struggle for power was fought not only within the imperial ladies but even extended to include other forces in the palace, especially the eunuchs. During Han dynasty, eunuchs “formed a pool of ambitious, well-placed men outside the external bureaucracy who hungered for power and wealth.”⁷⁴ As a result, they created “endless series of plots and intrigues,”⁷⁵ which caused great turmoil in the inner quarters and threatened the lives of many women, especially those within the palace.

As the instructor for royal empresses and concubines, it sounds reasonable that Ban Zhao wrote *Admonitions for Women* “as a pragmatic handbook teaching elite women how to survive the life-threatening intrigues at court and in the household.”⁷⁶ As Bret Hinsch argues, a woman’s outward subordination and helplessness will exclude her from the imperial struggle for power and make her “seem less threatening to those around her, thereby increasing her chances of

⁷⁰ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 221.

⁷¹ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 102.

⁷² Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 222.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 106.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

surviving violent plots.”⁷⁷ According to Bret Hinsch, a wise woman could “adopt the self-effacing rhetoric of patrilinealism as a kind of ideological camouflage that would render her innocuous in the eyes of her enemies,”⁷⁸ and thus made use of the Confucian ideals of female submission to her advantage. Therefore, instead of the conventional interpretation of *Admonitions for Women* as a “heavy-handed tool for oppressing women,” the text should be regarded as “an inspired guide for survival and success in the dangerous world of Han dynasty intrigue.”⁷⁹

Empress Deng Sui serves as a perfect example for such women’s utilization of outward submission as a clever shield of protection. Deng Sui entered the palace as a concubine of Emperor He and quickly “became everyone’s favorite” due to her “exemplary behavior” of humility and kindness.⁸⁰ Such behavior accords with the Confucian ideals of women’s conduct and certainly corresponds to Ban Zhao’s instruction on humility and submission in *Admonitions for Women*. The fact that Deng Sui’s exemplary behavior earned her the advantage of respect and favor from other people strongly supports Ban Zhao’s emphasis on women’s appropriate manner to earn good reputation and win husband’s affection. With humility and shrewdness, Deng Sui was able to survive the jealous plots of Empress Yin (陰皇后), and eventually replaced Empress Yin as the empress when Empress Yin was deposed due to accusation of witchcraft practice.⁸¹ The sharp contrast between the conducts of Deng Sui and Empress Yin thus further illustrates the immense advantage of women’s proper behavior within the palace. While Empress Yin conspicuously manifests her jealousy and aggressiveness, which eventually led to her

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 32.

⁸¹ Ibid.

dethronement as the empress, Deng Sui's outward display of humility and submission not only protected her in the dangerous inner palace but also helped her succeed and rise to power as the empress. After Emperor He passed away, Deng Sui served as regent for the young king and gained prominent political power over the country. As a devoted disciple of Ban Zhao, she often "conferred with Ban Zhao concerning the affairs of state."⁸² As one can see, therefore, Empress Deng certainly applied her instructor's strategy of women's humility to her advantage.

Empress Deng Sui's example proves that Ban Zhao's instructions on women's submission can not only protect women amidst the chaotic period but also empower them and help them gain influence without receiving attack from other people. Empress Deng and Empress Lü both served as regents and acquired political power over the country, but Empress Lü went down in history as a ruthless ruler and received tremendous objections during her lifetime and even after her death. Empress Deng, on the other hand, was praised and recognized for her exemplary behavior as an empress dowager. Therefore, Ban Zhao indeed provides a very wise insight when she emphasizes on women's proper conduct of modesty and devotion to earn good reputation, as gaining respect and winning the husband's heart can secure a woman's happiness and empowers her in so many ways. *Admonitions for Women* thus should be interpreted as a practical guidance for women to survive and thrive in the Confucian society, especially within the inner quarters. Such understanding is consistent with Ban Zhao's wisdom and ambition demonstrated in her writings and most reasonably accounts for the tension between Ban Zhao's superior position and her lesson of women's submission.

⁸² Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.*, 41.

Ban Zhao's Strict Values and Han Period of Relaxed Social Practices

One of the most common and legitimate arguments against *Admonitions for Women* is that the values Ban Zhao put forward are “far more stringent than those generally in practice” at the time, and thus *Admonitions for Women* served to impose controls on women’s lives and “restrain people with propriety.”⁸³ This argument is not completely unfounded, as it is true that the principles Ban Zhao set forth in *Admonitions for Women* are more rigid than the actual practice. For example, Ban Zhao strongly discourages remarriage for women in her instructions, while remarriage was a common practice during Han dynasty. In fact, “there were no restrictions against remarriage,” and remarriage was deemed proper for the time.⁸⁴ Widowed and divorced women “were free to remarry,” and numerous of them actually did.⁸⁵

However, although remarriage for women was not condemned, it was certainly not something well respected or praiseworthy. Like Ban Zhao said, while “in *The Record of Rites* is written the principle that a husband may marry again, there is no Canon that authorizes a woman to be married the second time.”⁸⁶ As a result, even though not required, chastity is still a desired and admirable virtue during the Han dynasty. In fact, people respected and exemplified chaste women, as evidenced by many biographies of such virtuous and pure women in the book *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (列女傳) by the Han scholar Liu Xiang (劉向)⁸⁷. One example is the entry on “Pure Jiang, Wife of King Zhao of Chu” (楚昭貞姜), who refused to

⁸³ Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*, 21.

⁸⁴ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 42.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 185.

⁸⁷ Liu Xiang composed *Biographies of Exemplary Women* during the early Han dynasty. The book celebrates many ancient Chinese women with exemplary virtues that were deemed desirable for women at the time.

follow another man and sacrificed herself to safeguard her chastity and loyalty to husband.⁸⁸ A similar entry in the book is one on “Tao Ying, A Widow in Lu” (魯寡陶嬰), who rejected to remarry “despite being left to bring up her young children without support.”⁸⁹ As one can see, despite the common practice of remarriage, chastity is still a commendable virtue and women who refrain from remarriage still earn respect and admiration from other people.

As a result, it is reasonable that Ban Zhao would put forward a more stringent approach towards remarriage, as she put a strong emphasis on winning husband’s affection and attaining esteem from other people. According to Hinsch, “when [people] wanted to judge their own accomplishments or those of others, they would use this set of unusually strict values” as Ban Zhao set forth.⁹⁰ Therefore, adopting a rigid approach in one’s behavior will help a woman “earn the admiration of influential people around her”⁹¹ and put her at an advantage over those who do not follow such stringent values. In fact, Ban Zhao herself also gained immense respects from other people for her refusal to remarry when her husband passed away. Thus, such rigid and conservative approach in *Admonitions for Women* was indeed a clever tactic to gain good reputation to the advantage of women.

The argument that Ban Zhao’s stringent approach aims to inflict control and restrain women is also weakened by the fact that many widowed and divorced women during Han dynasty were actually forced to remarry, instead of having the option to remarry. As a matter of fact, “often the women themselves did not wish to remarry, their families or the authorities

⁸⁸ Lily X.H Lee, Agnes D Stefanowska, and S Wiles, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity Through Sui, 1600 B.C.E.-618 C.E.* (M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁰ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 123.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

would coerce them into remarriage.”⁹² This is due to a social reality that the main purpose of marriage was to “unite the affections of the two families,” and therefore, marriage “was always contracted by the parents” without considering any individuals’ will.⁹³ As a result, the option to remarry does not necessarily mean female equity and bring about women’s happiness. One can argue, therefore, that Ban Zhao’s approach to refrain from remarriage does not really undermine any female privileges or take away women’s happiness. In fact, the refusal to remarry can even be considered a subtle way to claim female independence, which corresponds to Ban Zhao’s philosophies of self-improvement and liberation manifested in her poem “Rhapsody on a Journey to the East.” Specifically, as marriage ties a woman to her home and the inner sphere, the declination to remarry could be regarded as an inconspicuous statement of liberation that enables the woman to pursue her self-interests. Ban Zhao herself is a perfect example of her own philosophies, as her refusal to remarry allowed her to pursue her literary career and fulfill her quest for knowledge. As a result, Ban Zhao successfully achieved exalted positions while still earning respect and reputation for her virtue. In a society where “the moral dictates of patrilineal values were synonymous with the standards for a successful life,”⁹⁴ therefore, Ban Zhao proved that women could embrace Confucian ideals to empower themselves and serve their own self-interests.

As one can see, Ban Zhao’s guidance on conservatism and submission could not only protect women amidst the chaotic period of Han dynasty but also help them succeed in the Confucian society by establishing a high standing of virtues and morals. However, one cannot deny that such stringent approach contributed to the development of a highly rigorous

⁹² Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*, 21.

⁹³ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 34.

⁹⁴ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 123.

expectation towards women during subsequent dynasties, “when a remarried woman was an object of disgrace.”⁹⁵ However, the text *Admonitions for Women* itself did not bring about this drastic development, as evidenced by the insignificant influence the text seemed to have before the publication of *Four Books for Women* in Ming dynasty.⁹⁶ With the annotation and editing of the Confucian scholar Wang Xiang, *Admonitions for Women*, as part of the *Four Books for Women*, became a book teaching Confucian virtues instead of a practical guidance for women, and the morals put forth by Ban Zhao became the stringent standards that all women were expected to follow. The following analysis will explore the social context of Ming dynasty when the *Four Books for Women* was published, and provides an analytical comparison between Ban Zhao’s original text of *Admonitions for Women* and the annotated version by Wang Xiang to reveal Confucian male scholars’ manipulation of Ban Zhao’s writing to fortify Confucian ideals.

MING DYNASTY AND FOUR BOOKS FOR WOMEN

Neo-Confucianism and Stringent Expectations of Women

Ming dynasty saw a particularly significant effort to revive Confucianism manifested through its immense emphasis on Neo-Confucianism. After Han dynasty, China witnessed a long period of declining Confucianism due to the rising influence of other philosophies such as Buddhism and Daoism. In early Song dynasty, however, Confucianism started to regain its power over the philosophical mainstream, as Song’s politically unstable environment prompted

⁹⁵ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 42.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

many scholars to reinstitute and develop Confucianism.⁹⁷ The evolution of Confucianism in Song dynasty gave rise to Neo-Confucianism, which embraced the fundamental principles of Confucianism but “went much further in developing new ideas and concepts that were foreign to the early Confucianists” in terms of transcendental theories and moral values.⁹⁸

Neo-Confucianism in Ming dynasty imposed a more stringent and restrictive expectations towards women. In fact, “the Ming legislation institutionalized an unprecedented degree of patrilineality and stripped women of legal rights they had traditionally enjoyed.”⁹⁹ Specifically, Ming dynasty put a burdensome emphasis on women’s chastity and martyrdom. Chastity pertains to women’s sexual saintliness and unswerving loyalty towards their husbands, while martyrdom refers to the notion of self-sacrifice in order to preserve such chastity.¹⁰⁰ Ming emperors publicly venerated women with such virtues through its policy that “a woman who was widowed before she was 30 and remained unmarried until the age of 50 would be honored by the state with a memorial arch.”¹⁰¹ Ming dynasty also solemnly commemorated widowed women who sacrificed themselves to safeguard their purity,¹⁰² and as a result, the suicidal rates of widows increased drastically during this period.¹⁰³

Besides chastity, the second most important virtue for a woman in Ming dynasty is her complete fidelity to her parents-in-law, which is closely related to the desired virtue of chastity.

⁹⁷ Siu-Chi Huang, *Essentials of Neo-Confucianism: Eight Major Philosophers of the Song and Ming Periods* (Greenwood Press, 1999), 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁹ The authors were referring to the right to inheritance, which Chinese women enjoyed to some extent before Ming dynasty. For example, women were allowed to inherit assets and properties in Song dynasty, but the legal systems in Ming dynasty took away this entitlement. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard Von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 239.

¹⁰⁰ Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R Piggott, *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (University of California Press, 2003), 220.

¹⁰¹ Helen Tierney, *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Greenwood Press, 1991), 70.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Arvind Sharma, *Women in World Religions* (SUNY Press, 1987), 157.

This is also one of the key distinctions between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, as the latter tends to give a priority to women's allegiance towards parents-in-law over the fidelity to their own parents. The two desired virtues, chastity and loyalty to parents-in-law, both originate from the Ming's expectations that women should be entirely dedicated to her husband, and thus "a wife's fidelity to her husband ... [should take] precedence over all other obligations."¹⁰⁴ A woman's complete devotion to her husband implies her full commitment to not only himself but also his parents and his family. A woman was thus expected to put the husband's parents above her own parents and there was a higher burden on women to remain "pure as ice and frost, in order to serve [the] parents-in-law."¹⁰⁵ As one can see, Neo-Confucianism in Ming dynasty thus exploited Confucian ideals to the highest degree to degrade and further restrict the role of women in the society.

Women's Education and *Four Books for Women*

Unsurprisingly, the best way to enforce such rigorous controls and expectations towards women would be by means of education, and indeed the "concern about female education [in Ming dynasty] was mounting."¹⁰⁶ Even though female literacy during the period was not widely prevalent, Neo-Confucianism "approved of women acquiring a basic education so long as it was keeping with feminine modesty."¹⁰⁷ In fact, education could be a powerful tool to promulgate and reinforce Neo-Confucian ideals and values. Specifically, one important purpose of female

¹⁰⁴ Ko, Haboush, and Piggott, *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, 231.

¹⁰⁵ The quote is an advice from a mother for her widowed daughter-in-law. Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Rubie S Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, vol. 12 (University of California Press, 1991), 214.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Elizabeth McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*, vol. 41 (Brill Academic Pub, 1998), 68.

education in Ming dynasty was to train a woman into a good wife and wise mother, who can thus “rear wise sons and grandsons.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, even though female education was becoming more popular during the period, it was not so much for the sake of the women themselves but mainly to serve men’s benefits and fortify Neo-Confucianism.

Although most women from lower classes did not have the opportunity to receive education, many women during Ming dynasty, especially those from elite families, were highly literate and “some were even literary.”¹⁰⁹ For those who acquired learning, one of the primary materials for their education was the *Four Books for Women*. The collection was published around the early seventeenth century by Ming scholar Wang Xiang, who assembled and edited four instructional texts written previously by female scholars. *Four Books for Women* includes *Admonitions for Women* by Ban Zhao, *Women’s Analects* by Song Ruoxin and Song Ruozhao, the *Domestic Lessons* (內訓) by Empress Xu (徐皇后) and the *Sketch of a Model for Women* (女範捷錄) by Wang Xiang’s own mother. The four texts were written in different time periods; the first two were composed in Han and Tang dynasty respectively, and the last two texts during Ming dynasty. *Four Books for Women* provide detailed instructions on proper behaviors for women, and were deemed to “promote the “wise and worthy wives and good mothers” character model of feudal ideology.”¹¹⁰ Although the publication and circulation of the collection did not explicitly address upper-class women, it mainly served the educational purpose for “the consorts and concubines at the feudal royal courts and ... the women’s apartments of well-known great

¹⁰⁸ Watson and Ebrey, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, 214.

¹⁰⁹ McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*, 68.

¹¹⁰ Mingqi Zhang, “The Four Books for Women: Ancient Chinese Texts for the Education of Women,” *David C. Lam Institute for East West Studies*,

<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln471/fourbookwoman.htm>

families,”¹¹¹ who, again, were more likely to receive education and training than those from lower class.

As part of the *Four Books for Women*, Ban Zhao’s *Admonitions for Women* became an integral learning material to propagate and reinforce Confucian ideals, which was not necessarily the original meaning of Ban Zhao’s writing. *Admonitions for Women* thus perfectly represents the tension between female authorship and male editing in traditional Chinese literatures. As the verbal and written languages were usually different in traditional literatures, annotation was a common practice to explain written languages in a way that readers could comprehend. However, since each word can have many levels of meaning, the editor’s annotation is not necessarily the author’s true message, but rather the editor’s own interpretation of the text. This thus creates an opportunity for the editor, whether intentionally or not, to manipulate the meaning of the original text and promulgate his own understanding instead. Especially, when male scholars annotate female’s works, as in the case of *Four Books for Women*, there are certainly some conflicts between the men’s interpretation and women’s writing motivated by the differences in gender perspectives. The following analytical comparison between Ban Zhao’s original text of *Admonitions for Women* and Wang Xiang’s annotation will explicate such tension between female writing and men’s manipulation to elucidate the understanding of the text.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN*

“卑弱” (beiruo)

Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* opens with the first chapter titled “卑弱” (beiruo),¹¹² which is a crucial term that refers to the attitude and behavior that a woman should have. Interestingly, the term can have varying meanings and connotations depending on different interpretations. Specifically, “卑弱” is a combination of two words, “卑” (bei) and “弱” (ruo). The latter generally means weak and delicate, as in “軟弱” (ruanruo) or “柔弱” (rouruo), both of which convey a feeble and fragile state. The varying meaning of the term, therefore, lies in the word *bei*, which can either mean inferior and lowly (卑賤, beijian), or modest and humble (謙卑, qianbei), depending on the specific context of the word. As a result, *beiruo* can have a positive or negative connotation contingent upon readers' construal, and a proper interpretation is thus crucial in understanding the message of Ban Zhao's instructions.

In his annotation of *beiruo*, Wang Xiang interprets the term as lowly and weak as he writes that “天尊地卑，陽剛陰柔。卑弱，女子之正義也，苟不甘于卑，而欲自尊，不伏於弱而欲自強，則犯義而非正矣。雖有他能，何足尚乎，” which can be translated as:

Heaven is high and the Earth is low, and yang is strong and yin is weak. Therefore, women are inferior and weak (卑弱) as the right way. If they do not willingly accept their lowly status, but want to have self-respect, and do not accept to be weak but want to be strong, they will be violating the right way. Even if they have the ability (to do so), what is the point (when you violate the right way)?¹¹³

¹¹² “卑弱” is translated as “humility” in Robin Wang's rendition, and as “lowly and weak” in Wilt Idema and Beata Grant's. The difference in translation reflects different interpretations of the word.

¹¹³ All the translation of Wang Xiang's annotation is my own work. Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng* 女四書集注義證 (Shang wu yin shu guan (Xiang gang) 商務印書館 (香港), 2008), 9.

From Wang Xiang's perspective, *bei* denotes lowly and inferior, as how the Earth is low compared to the lofty Heaven, and *ruo* means weak and fragile as yin compared to yang. The interpretation conveys a very degrading connotation towards women, as it claims that women should not have self-respect and self-empowerment since doing so will go against the right way of their lowly and weak status. As the Earth and yin were two common concepts traditionally associated with women, Wang Xiang's use of their characteristics to explicate *beiruo* does add a degree of legitimacy to his interpretation. Initially it also sounds accordant with Ban Zhao's writing as she writes that “古者生女三日，臥之牀下，弄之瓦甑，而齋告焉。臥之牀下，明其卑弱，主下人也。”¹¹⁴ The sentence is translated as follows:

On the third day after the birth of a girl the ancients observed three customs: (first) to place the baby below the bed; (second) to give her a potsherd with which to play; and (third) to announce her birth to her ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby below the bed plainly indicated that she is lowly and weak [卑弱], and should regard it as her primary duty to humble herself before others.¹¹⁵

Ban Zhao's portrayal of the female infant being placed below the bed does suggest a low and inferior status, which corresponds with Wang Xiang's interpretation. However, if one reads the excerpt closely, Ban Zhao is merely listing her observations of social customs and practices towards women, which accordingly determines three main social expectations of a woman, including her “duty to humble herself before others,” “duty to be industrious,” and “duty [to continue] observance of worship in the home.”¹¹⁶ In the chapter, Ban Zhao makes no references

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 179.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 179.

that women are not allowed to respect and empowerment themselves as Wang Xiang interprets. In fact, according to Ban Zhao, if women fulfill these three duties, no women will “ha[ve] a bad reputation or ... fall into disgrace.”¹¹⁷ In a way, this is how women can empower themselves, especially in the Confucian society where one’s reputation and prestige are of great importance. Therefore, Wang Xiang’s interpretation of *beiruo* somewhat distorts the connotation of the word and thus leads to a misleading construal of the chapter.

So how should Ban Zhao’s *beiruo* be understood? An alternative meaning of *bei* is “modest” and “humble”, which relates closely to Wang Xiang’s interpretation of “inferior” or “lowly” but can have a completely different nuance and implication. For example, when an ancient Chinese official talks with his superior, he refers to himself as “卑职” (*beizhi*), which literally means “a lower position,” in order to reflect his lower status and more importantly, to show modesty and respect to the other person. Therefore, the word *bei* in this situation can mean both “inferior” and “humble,” but it mainly denotes that the person is being modest and respectful rather than being lowly with no self-respect in a negative connotation.¹¹⁸ Especially, the *Book of Han* even refers favorably to *beiruo* as a commendable art or skill of a good leader, because “staying clear and empty (in one’s mind) to protect oneself, staying humble (卑弱) to strengthen oneself, this is the art of a ruler.” (清虚以自守, 卑弱以自持, 此君人南面之術也)¹¹⁹ The word *beiruo*, therefore, can bear a very positive connotation to indicate a modest attitude or virtue rather than an inferior status.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 180.

¹¹⁸ “卑弱” is also used in the idiom “言气卑弱” in a positive connotation to indicate a modest and docile way of talking.

¹¹⁹ The sentence refers to Taoism ideals of good emperors. The translation is my own work. Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 汉书 3 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 北京: 中华书局, 1999) 2:1370.

The biggest difference between such interpretation and Wang Xiang's understanding is their implications about women's inherent self-value. While Wang Xiang's interpretation that "women are inferior and weak (卑弱) as the right way" insinuates women's intrinsic self-value of inferiority, the interpretation of *beiruo* as "modest" and "humble" refers to an outward demonstration of inferiority and humility instead. Such interpretation, therefore, fits better with Ban Zhao's writings, as she mainly provides instructions regarding women's proper behavior and attitude in her texts: "謙讓恭敬, 先人後己, 有善莫名, 有惡莫辭, 忍辱含垢, 常若畏懼, 是謂卑弱下人也。"¹²⁰ The writing is translated as follows:

Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last. Should she do something good, let her not mention it; should she do something bad, let her not deny it. Let her bear disgrace, let her even endure when others speak or do evil to her. Always let her seem to tremble and fear. (When a woman follows such maxims as these,) then she may be said to humble herself before others.¹²¹

Although the words sound harsh, they primarily pertain to a desirable attitude and behavior that women should manifest rather than their own self-value. A woman can "modestly yield to others" and "bear disgrace" but still respects and empowers herself. In fact, a woman's conspicuous display of inferiority can earn her great respect and empowerment in Han's Confucian society as in the case of Empress Deng Sui, whose subdued and self-effacing behavior successfully protected her from the menacing schemes of former Empress Yin. Especially, the phrase "always let her seem to tremble and fear" (常若畏懼) strongly hints at the dangerous threats in the imperial place and the disorderly Han society in general. It highly suggests that

¹²⁰ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 9.

¹²¹ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 180.

women should always be fearful and hence, cautious of her surroundings. Therefore, as modesty was portrayed in the *Book of Han* as a good leader's tactic to rule the country, humility could also be interpreted as Ban Zhao's tactic for women to survive and thrive in the chaotic Han society.

The discrepancy in Wang Xiang's interpretation of the word *beiruo*, therefore, reveals a difference in gender perspective on women, particularly women's intrinsic self-value. While Wang Xiang's annotation assumes female inherent inferiority, Ban Zhao's writings instead indicate her implicit hint at women's empowerment through an outward display of inferiority. Wang Xiang's annotation of *beiruo* thus misleads the interpretation of the text and the understanding of Ban Zhao's view on women.

Yin-yang and the Relationship between Husband and Wife

Another notable difference between Ban Zhao's original text and Wang Xiang's edition is their adoptions of the yin-yang framework. Yin-Yang is an important principle in Confucianism, and both Ban Zhao and Wang Xiang refer to this concept in their writings to account for the differences between men and women. Wang Xiang mentions Yin-Yang principle in his annotations of *beiruo* to explain woman's inherent submission and men's nature of superiority. Specifically, he writes that "yang is strong and yin is weak" and thus "women are inferior and weak as the right way." In *Admonitions for Women's* third chapter, titled "Respect and Caution," Ban Zhao also adopted the yin-yang framework to demonstrate the gender differences between men and women. However, while Wang Xiang merely addresses women's inherent nature of inferiority, Ban Zhao's adoption of yin-yang focuses more on the utility of woman's gentleness and obedience. Specifically, Ban Zhao writes that "陰陽殊性, 男女異行。"

陽以剛為德，陰以柔為用，男以強為貴，女以弱為美，”¹²² or “[a]s yin and yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of yang is rigidity; the function of yin is yielding. A man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.”¹²³ The phrase “陰以柔為用，” which was translated as “the function of yin is yielding,” literally means that “yin employs softness for its utility.” Ban Zhao thus uses the word “用，” which means “function” or “usefulness,” in a sophisticated way to subtly reveal her view on the advantage of women’s gentle and yielding behavior.

A more critical difference between Ban Zhao and Wang Xiang’s adoption of yin-yang is that while Ban Zhao focuses extensively on the relationship between yin and yang, Wang Xiang’s annotations tends to ignore the interaction between these two elements. In Confucianism, yin and yang principles contrast yet complement each other, but Wang Xiang only emphasizes on the contrasting aspect and completely disregards the interdependent interaction between yin and yang, or the reciprocal relationship between men and women. Specifically, when Wang Xiang annotates Ban Zhao’s use of Yin-Yang, he notes that “言陰陽男女性行各別，陽剛陰柔，天之道也；男女強弱，人之性也，” or “[l]ike yin-yang, men and women have different natures. Yang is strong and yin is weak, this is the Way of Heaven. Men are strong and women are weak; this is the nature of human.”¹²⁴ According to his annotation, men and women are two separate entities, with one simply more superior than the other, and Wang Xiang makes no references to the interaction between them. Ban Zhao, on the other hand, stresses on the interdependent connection between male and female. According to Ban Zhao, men and women’s opposite

¹²² Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 15.

¹²³ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

¹²⁴ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 16.

characteristics are indeed essential for their harmonious and complementary relationship. In other words, contrasting traits exist to complement each other. As she writes “[t]o counteract firmness nothing equals compliances”¹²⁵ (避強莫弱順), Ban Zhao reveals that women’s softness and obedience complement men’s firmness and thus are crucial for a harmonious relationship between men and women. She further demonstrates this interaction when she dedicates an entire chapter to “Husband and Wife”¹²⁶ relationship. She writes that “夫婦之道, 參配陰陽, 通達神明, 信天地之宏義, 人倫之大節也...夫不賢, 則無以御婦。婦不賢, 則無以事夫,”¹²⁷ which could be translated as:

The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with yin and yang, and relates the individual to gods and ancestors. Truly it is the great principle of Heaven and Earth, and the great basis of human relationship...If a husband be unworthy, then he possesses nothing by which to control his wife. If a wife be unworthy, then she possess nothing with which to serve her husband.¹²⁸

If judged by modern standards, the writing seems to convey great gender inequality against women by stating that wives should serve and be controlled by their husbands. However, if one puts the writing within the context of Han society with prevalent concepts of yang (male) as the dominant and leading element, and yin (female) as the soft and yielding factor, the writing is merely stating a socially accepted notion regarding husband and wife relationship. The word “御” (yu), which was translated as “control” in “husband...control[s] his wife”, can also mean “defend” or “lead,” which corresponds directly with the active characteristics of yang. The text,

¹²⁵ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

¹²⁶ This is also the title of the second chapter.

¹²⁷ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 12.

¹²⁸ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 180-181.

therefore, mainly presents husband and wife's duties to each other rather than indicating any degrading attitude towards women. What's more important is that Ban Zhao emphasizes on the mutual relationship between husband and wife, as she claims that both husband and wife need to be "worthy" (賢) in order to properly fulfill their responsibilities to each other. This is especially significant as it goes beyond the contemporary Confucian ideology during Han dynasty, which puts a great emphasis on gender hierarchy and "one-way relationship"¹²⁹ instead of mutual interdependence. Therefore, on one hand, Ban Zhao accepts the wifely duties as a social fact, but on the other hand, she expresses hint of gender equality through her emphasis on mutual duties and reciprocal relationship between men and women.

Although both Ban Zhao and Wang Xiang refer to the yin-yang framework to explain the gender differences and demonstrate women's desired behaviors, Ban Zhao focuses on the relationship between yin and yang to signify the interdependence between men and women, and thus subtly reveals their equally important roles in a harmonious relationship. On the other hand, Wang Xiang's disregard for this interaction somewhat devalues women as simply an inferior and subordinate entity in the society. This subtle yet critical difference in Wang Xiang's adoption of yin-yang thus induces a negative attitude towards women that is not manifested in Ban Zhao's original writing.

Rituals (禮) and Women's Education

Another crucial indication of Ban Zhao's allusion to gender equality is her promotion of women's education, which also relates closely with the mutual relationship between men and women. According to Ban Zhao, both husband and wife need to know rituals in order to properly

¹²⁹ Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*, 109.

fulfill their duties to each other, and as a result women should also receive education. Specifically, Ban Zhao argues that “義禮之不可不存也。但教男而不教女, 不亦蔽於彼此之數乎;”¹³⁰ or “the proper relationship and the rites [between husband and wife] should be maintained. Yet only to teach men and not to teach women – is that not ignoring the essential relation between?”¹³¹ Rituals, or li (禮), is a pivotal concept in Confucianism, which “encompasses all kinds of ritualized behavior, both public and private, from table manners to rites of passage, seasonal festivals, and government functions.”¹³² Confucius’ alleged saying, “[I]ook at nothing contrary to ritual; hear nothing contrary to ritual; do nothing contrary to ritual,”¹³³ also demonstrates the immense importance of li in maintaining an orderly Confucian society with proper conduct and behavior. In fact, the *Record of Rites* (禮記), which was allegedly composed by Confucius and later recompiled during Han dynasty, are among the Five Classics that constitute the fundamental Confucian learning.¹³⁴

What’s notable about li, however, is that it is not merely about maintaining a proper manner and conduct, but more importantly, li emphasizes on the development and fostering of the inner self, which, in turn, will result in an outer display of decorum. Specifically, chapter “Great Learning” (大學) in the *Record of Rites* states that “everyone must consider developing the self to be the fundamental root of things.”¹³⁵ This is also the core idea of Confucianism,

¹³⁰ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 12.

¹³¹ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

¹³² Deborah Sommer, *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources*, vol. 20 (Oxford University Press, 1995), 31.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³⁴ The Five Classics include Book of Documents (尚書), Record of Rites, Classic of Changes (易經), Classic of Poetry (詩經) and Spring and Autumn Annals (春秋).

¹³⁵ Sommer, *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources*, 39.

which focuses heavily on self-cultivation and self-development into honorable gentlemen. As a result, although *li* pertains to a broad range of propriety and decorum in the society, it is primarily a *male* concept in Confucianism, since the idea of self-cultivation was intended for men only. Indeed, such educational materials as the *Record of Rites* were only available for men's learning purposes, and Confucian education traditionally excluded women.

Ban Zhao, however, is challenging such traditional view towards women's education as she writes that “察今之君子...禮，八歲始教之書，十五而至於學矣。獨不可依此以為則哉!”¹³⁶ Her argument can be translated as “[n]ow examine the gentlemen of the present age... According to the *Record of Rites*, it is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years, and by the age of fifteen years they ought then to be ready for cultural training. Only why should it not be (that girl's education as well as boys' be) according to this principle?”¹³⁷ The word “examine” (察) particularly reveals Ban Zhao's critical mind, indicating that she does not blindly adhere to contemporary ideas accepted by “the gentlemen of the present age,” but actively reflects and challenges such ideas. More importantly, Ban Zhao not only questions the contemporary gentlemen, but also challenges what is written in the *Record of Rites*, which claims that while boys at age fifteen pursue their education, girls should “assume the hair-pin” and start prepare themselves for marriage by “learn[ing] all women's work.”¹³⁸ Ban Zhao defies such well-established doctrines by rhetorically questioning why females cannot “be ready for cultural training” like males do. Considering the fact that books' knowledge was traditionally regarded as utmost truths and principles, therefore, Ban Zhao's argument indeed indicates her critical

¹³⁶ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 12.

¹³⁷ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

thinking and strong female empowerment as she even dares to challenge such a core Confucian educational material and highly respected book as the *Record of Rites*. It strongly shows that although Ban Zhao is influenced by Confucian thinking, she does not readily accept any Confucian ideas and actively challenges such established values and principles.

However, what demonstrates most clearly Ban Zhao's notion of gender equality and female empowerment is not merely her argument that women should receive education, but that women should the *same* education as men. Specifically, regarding the interaction between husband and wife, Ban Zhao claims that “方斯二者, 其用一也”¹³⁹ or “[a]s a matter of fact the purpose of these two (the controlling of women by men, and the serving of men by women) is the same.”¹⁴⁰ According to Ban Zhao, the seemingly separate duties of husband and wife are indeed interrelated and serve the same function of maintain a harmonious relationship like two faces of a coin. Therefore, when Ban Zhao argues for women's education because li should exist in the relationship between husband and wife, she most likely refers to the same education of rituals that men customarily received. As li was traditionally a male concept, the fact that Ban Zhao embraces li's education for women thus strongly indicates her female empowerment and advocacy of gender equity. It also corresponds with the spirited attitudes manifested in her poem “Rhapsody on a Journey to the East,” in which she adopts Confucian values of self-cultivation and emancipation to empower herself as a woman.

Such idea of female potency and gender equity is evidently absent in Wang Xiang's annotation, which otherwise suggests that there should be a segregation of education between men and women. Specifically, regarding Ban Zhao's argument of women's education, Wang

¹³⁹ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 181.

Xiang notes that “是以當時，無女教之書，而女子鮮知事夫之義，未明閨門之禮，” or “[a]t the time, there are no books for women. Women thus barely know how to serve their husbands and don’t understand the maidenly rituals.”¹⁴¹ Wang Xiang’s comment of “books for women” (女教之書) highly suggests a separate instructions for women and thus a segregated education between male and female. Such notion also corresponds with the increasing emergence and popularity of educational instructions exclusively for women during Ming dynasty, as demonstrated by the publication of the *Four Books for Women*. Two out of four texts in the collection, including *the Domestic Lessons* by Empress Xu and *Sketch of a Model for Women* by Wang Xiang’s mother, were both written in Ming period. Ban Zhao, on the other hand, makes no references to such “books for women” in her original writing, which also accords with the limited availability of women’s books during Han dynasty. Therefore, the discrepancy between Wang Xiang and Ban Zhao’s writing not only demonstrates a gender perspective difference but also indicates a social difference between two distinct historical periods. As segregation of education undermines equality, Wang Xiang’s annotation impairs the significance of Ban Zhao’s argument for women’s education and gender equity.

The Way (道) of Stringent Approaches towards Women

Another critical difference between Ban Zhao’s writing and Wang Xiang’s interpretations is the differing implications of their demanding approaches towards women. In *Admonitions for Women*, Ban Zhao prescribes stringent behaviors and conducts towards women, particularly the abstinence from remarriage and complete obedience to parents-in-law. However, while Ban

¹⁴¹ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 14.

Zhao focuses on the utility and benefits of such approaches, Wang Xiang's annotation advocates them more as established principles rather than for their practicality.

In both chapters regarding women's chastity and obedience to parents-in-law, Ban Zhao repeatedly refers to the ancient saying that “得意一人，是謂永畢；失意一人，是謂永訖，”¹⁴² which could be understood as “[t]o obtain the love of one man is the crown of a woman's life; to lose the love of one man is to miss the aim in woman's life.”¹⁴³ The saying clearly points out the attainment of husband's affection as the practical and ultimate purpose of women's conservative and rigid approaches. If judged from modern perspectives, such notion goes against modern ideas of female independence by conveying women's reliance on men as their ultimate goal, thus seemingly indicating great gender inequality. However, considering the social realities of Han dynasty, especially under the polygamy system in which a woman had to share her husband and household position with other concubines, winning the love and attention of the husband could bring a woman a lot of advantages. In fact, obtaining the king's affection always became a powerful tool in conflicts amongst imperial empresses and concubines to strive for power and higher ranking. During the chaotic period of Han dynasty, therefore, securing husband's affection is of great importance, and the Ban Zhao's indeed makes a very good point when she focuses on the significance of “win[ning the] husband's heart.”¹⁴⁴

In order to obtain husband's affection, Ban Zhao thus sets forth stringent approaches such as chastity and compliance to parents-in-law. Chastity means a committed devotion to a woman's husband and hence an abstinence from remarriage, while compliance to parents-in-law

¹⁴² Ibid., 22.

¹⁴³ Translation from Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 185.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

means “an obedience that sacrifices personal opinion.” (曲從)¹⁴⁵ Specifically, according to Ban Zhao, a woman should “submit unflinching to the command”¹⁴⁶ of her parents-in-law, even when the parents-in-law are wrong (姑云爾而非, 猶宜順命).¹⁴⁷ Although such behaviors might come across as blindly worshipping and submissive to the husband’s side, it is indeed a wise way of maintaining the good will and harmony in the house, especially considering the fact that parents-in-law have dominant authority over the husband, and their opinions is an important factor in deciding the happiness of a woman’s marital life.¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, even Ban Zhao’s own sister-in-law did not interpret Ban Zhao’s writing as advocating blind submission to the husband’s family. On the contrary, the sister-in-law was displeased as she construed Ban Zhao’s message as portraying “the husband’s family as a veritable pit of snakes.”¹⁴⁹ Her personal relationship and proximity to Ban Zhao’s conducts in husband’s family also give more credibility to such interpretation. Indeed, Ban Zhao’s instructions of absolute compliance could be interpreted as being cautious and forbearing to avoid the threat and troubles in the husband’s family. It is also worth noting that Ban Zhao does not state that parents-in-law are always right, which would otherwise suggest a blind and mindless conformity. Rather, she writes that “even if what [parents-in-law] says is wrong, still the daughter-in-law submits unflinching to the command.”¹⁵⁰ The saying thus strongly implies that a woman is aware of the order’s validity, yet still chooses to conform for her own benefit. Therefore, Ban Zhao’s prescription of such stringent behaviors is

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 186.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 24.

¹⁴⁸ Qu, *Han Social Structure*, 37.

¹⁴⁹ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 186.

most reasonably interpreted as a clever way of preserving harmony and eluding troubles for the women's advantages.

While Ban Zhao emphasizes on such practicality, Wang Xiang instead attributes such stringent behaviors to absolute principles and the “Way” of wife and daughter-in-law. Specifically, he annotates women's chastity that “婦人之道，從一而終，故夫亡無再家之禮也，” or “as the Way of married women, wife will follow her husband until the very end, and if the husband dies the wife cannot remarry.”¹⁵¹ Similarly, regarding compliance to parents-in-law, Wang Xiang notes: “此章明事舅姑之道，若舅姑言是，而婦順從之，正也；惟舅姑使令以非道，而婦亦順從之，是謂曲從，乃可謂之孝，” which means that “as the Way of serving parents-in-law, if what parents-in-law say is correct, then the daughter-in-law of course has to obey. But if the parents-in-law's order is wrong, and the daughter-in-law still listens, then it is implicit obedience, and one may say it is filial piety.”¹⁵² As one can see, Wang Xiang uses the “Way,” an important concept in Confucianism to account for the notion of absolute chastity and conformity to parents-in-law. The Way, or “dao,” alludes to “the Confucian teachings and practices as a tradition, specifically the essential ones; that is to say, the Truth.”¹⁵³ A person will always seek to realize “dao”, just like one needs to attain the ultimate truth in life. Therefore, “dao” has an implication of absoluteness and inherent correctness, and was always used by Confucian scholars as an indisputable measure to determine the righteousness of an action.

As a result, when Wang Xiang uses the Way to explicate the demanding approaches to women's behaviors, he inevitably implies that such behaviors are righteous and obligatory by

¹⁵¹ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 22.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵³ Rodney Leon Taylor and Howard Yuen Fung Choy, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, vol. 1 (The Rosen Publishing Group, 2005), 589.

nature, which also corresponds with the Neo-Confucian established doctrines of women's chastity and fidelity to parents-in-law during Ming dynasty. When such controlled and stringent behaviors become the "dao" of women, female restrictions and inferiority become an inherent and unquestionable truth that all women have to abide by. This is different from Ban Zhao's original writing, which refers to such behaviors more as a practical choice that women should opt for their own advantages. Therefore, with only one subtle addition of the Confucian term "dao," Wang Xiang reveals a different implication of women's restricted behaviors and highlights the notion of gender inequality that is not in Ban Zhao's original message. Throughout the text *Admonitions for Women*, such discrepancies in Wang Xiang's annotation create different nuances and significantly influence the understanding of the text. The discrepancies also reveal a gender difference in their perspectives of women, particularly a male bias towards women's inherent inferiority and submission, and female advocacy of gender equality and female empowerment.

IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER DEVELOPMENT FROM HAN TO MING

Established expectations of women

The differences between Ban Zhao and Wang Xiang's writing in *Admonitions for Women* not only demonstrate a differing perspective between male and female authors, but more importantly, they reveal a period difference in gender constructions between Han and Ming dynasty. Specifically, it substantiates the observation that women's stringent practices were firmly established as standard principles and values under Neo-Confucianism, while during Han

dynasty, such behaviors were certainly admired and desirable, but not at all rigidly defined and obligatory.

This is not only demonstrated by Wang Xiang's annotation of women's chastity and obedience to parents-in-law as the "Way," but is also clearly reflected when Wang Xiang refers to women's compliance to parents-in-law as "filial piety" (孝). Specifically, Wang Xiang remarks: "But if the parents-in-law's order is wrong, and the daughter-in-law still listens, then it is implicit obedience, and one may say it is filial piety."¹⁵⁴ In his annotations, Wang Xiang uses an important Confucian concept of "filial piety" to denote women's obedience to parents-in-law, while Ban Zhao never uses the term when referring to such behaviors in her writing. It thus supports the observation that during Han dynasty, filial piety generally alludes to the obedience and respect towards one's own parents, while under Neo-Confucianism the term is more clearly defined to encompass women's fidelity to parents-in-law. Such difference is further demonstrated in the contrasts between the two books *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經) and *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* (女孝經). The former was allegedly composed in early Han dynasty¹⁵⁵ and the book thus represents the early Confucian ideals of filial piety. On the other hand, while the publication date of the *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* is uncertain, the text was apparently widely popular during Song dynasty when Neo-Confucianism started to develop. Therefore, the *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* can be said to demonstrate Neo-Confucian notions of filial piety, particular filial piety for women.

¹⁵⁴ Huang Yanli, *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng*, 25.

¹⁵⁵ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: a Sourcebook* (Free Pr, 1993), 64.

Classic of Filial Piety defines common people's filial piety as "tak[ing] care of themselves and [being] cautious in their expenditures in order to support their parents."¹⁵⁶ Under Confucianism, therefore, filial piety mainly refers to loyalty to one's parents, and is generally defined for both men and women. In fact, it can be argued that "many of the situations [the *Classic of Filial Piety*] discusses were more relevant to men's lives."¹⁵⁷ For example, the book states that "filial piety begins with serving our parents, continues with serving the ruler, and is completed by establishing one's character."¹⁵⁸ As the establishment of character or the cultivation of the self was traditionally intended for men, one can safely say that early Confucian filial piety was primarily targeted at male audiences, or at least there was no specific definition of filial piety for women at the time. On the contrary, *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* under Neo-Confucianism specifies filial piety for women as "putting others first and themselves last in order to serve their parents in law."¹⁵⁹ The book also goes into further details to particularly explain proper ways of serving parents-in-law. The distinctions between the two books thus speak in dialogue with the discrepancies between Wang Xiang and Ban Zhao's writing, which clearly reflect the differences between Han dynasty and Ming dynasty in terms of women's expectations. Under Neo Confucianism during Ming dynasty, such values as filial piety were more clearly defined and well established for women, and thus social expectations towards women were more firmly constructed as standard principles compared to those during Ban Zhao's times.

¹⁵⁶ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 375.

¹⁵⁷ M Christian Green and John Witte Jr, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 408.

¹⁵⁸ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 374.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 381.

Gender Segregation

Another implication of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* or the *Four books for Women* is the aggravation of gender segregation during Ming dynasty. The notion of gender segregation, which refers to the separation between male and female, existed long time ago in early Confucianism, as demonstrated in the Confucian philosopher Mencius' famous saying “男女授受不親,” which are literally translated as “men and women can give and take (objects), but should not have physical contact with each other.”¹⁶⁰ Using the action of handing and receive objects as an example, the saying highlights the idea that male and female should always have a physical distance with each other and avoid the any proximity or intimacy. Such notion of gender separation is further elaborated in the *Record of Rites*, which states that “[m]ale and female should not sit together (in the same apartment), nor have the same stand or rack for their clothes, nor use the same towel or comb, nor let their hands touch in giving and receiving.”¹⁶¹ As one can see, Confucian ideals set a very rigid separation between men and women, and the presence of such notion in the *Record of Rites* suggests that gender separation already existed in early Han dynasty.

However, such segregation between male and female grew even more pronounced during Ming dynasty, which is certainly explicable by the fact that Ming dynasty tried to further tighten and reinforce Confucian ideals. This gender segregation is first and foremost demonstrated by Wang Xiang's annotation of yin and yang as two separate entities without any relationship in *Admonitions for Women*. As yin and yang are traditionally representative of women and men, his

¹⁶⁰ Huang Ze Cun 黄泽存, *Xin Shi Qi Diu Wai Xuan Zhuan Lun Gao* 新时期对外宣传论稿 (Wu Zhou Zhuan Bo Chu Ban She 五洲传播出版社, 2002), 473.

¹⁶¹ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 49.

writing certainly highlights the separation between male and female under Neo-Confucianism. As a matter of fact, during Song dynasty, “women veiled their faces more often and rode in curtain sedan chairs when travelling through the streets.”¹⁶² The practice to hide their faces highlights women’s inclination to avoid interaction or contact with men during the period. In addition, when a woman was treated by a doctor, the doctor could “neither view the woman nor question her,” and “all [the doctors] could do was take the pulse of a hand extended through the bed curtains” without any physical contact.¹⁶³ As one can see, Neo-Confucianism puts a severe emphasis on the separation between male and female, both in terms of physical contact and normal interaction or relationship. Such extreme gender segregation was apparently not prevalent under Confucian during Han dynasty, as indicated by Ban Zhao’s emphasis on the relationship between men and women in her original writing.

Another indication of gender separation is the distinction between women and men’s education during Ming dynasty, which is demonstrated by Wang Xiang’s remark of “books for women” when referring to education for women.¹⁶⁴ The annotation highly suggests a separate set of instructions for women’s education. In fact, Neo-Confucianism during Ming dynasty witnessed many publications of women’s books in parallel to men’s educational materials, namely the *Four Books for Women*. While men had the *Four Books* as one of the core educational materials, the *Four Books for Women* served as the primary materials for the education of women during Ming dynasty. The *Four Books* collection, which includes the “Great

¹⁶² Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 160.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ It is important to note that while the term women’s education is used, women did not receive formal education like men. Most education for women was conducted at home, while men received formal education in class. This also demonstrates the education segregation in terms of physical separation between men and women.

Learning,” “Analects,” “Maintaining Perfect Balance,” and “Mencius,”¹⁶⁵ mainly provides instructions regarding the cultivation of one’s character and the learning of knowledge. On the other hand, *The Four Books for Women* focuses on the behaviors and conducts that are deemed appropriate for women “to promote the “wise and worthy wives and good mothers” character model of feudal ideology.¹⁶⁶ Similar books include the *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* and *Classics for Girls* (女兒經), which speak directly in parallel with men’s versions of *Classic of Filial Piety* and *Classic for Boys* (三字經).¹⁶⁷ Like *Four books for Women*, these women’s books mainly address female duties such as serving parents-in-law and four womanly virtues, while the corresponding men’s versions highlight the learning and Confucian values of gentlemen.

As one can see, therefore, the essence of the education segregation was the different types and purposes between men and women’s education. Specifically, while male education aimed to train men for external successes and particularly higher position in the imperial system, female education primarily instructed women to properly fulfill their duties in the inner household.¹⁶⁸ Such differing purposes between men and women’s education hence highlight the escalated separation of spaces between male and female under Neo-Confucianism. As female education mainly pertained to domestic matters, it shows how women were presumed to stay within the inner sphere, while men were expected to attain achievements in external society. In fact, the common practice of women’s footbinding also substantiates the Neo-Confucianism’s

¹⁶⁵ Daniel K Gardner and Xi Zhu, *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition* (Hackett Publishing Company Incorporated, 2007), 18.

¹⁶⁶ Mingqi Zhang, “The Four Books for Women: Ancient Chinese Texts for the Education of Women.”

¹⁶⁷ Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*, 437.

¹⁶⁸ As a matter of fact, books such as *Classics of Filial Piety for Women* and *Classics for Girls* were adapted from original books for men, but the content was adjusted to fit the educational purpose for women.

exacerbated confinement of women to the domestic space. The practice of footbinding, which became widely spread from Song dynasty through Ming period, tightly compressed women's feet and made it extremely hard for them to walk.¹⁶⁹ As a result, one can argue that the practice has an important implication of preventing women from walking far from home and thus confining them to the inner sphere. As one can see, under Neo-Confucianism during Ming dynasty men and women became more segregated in terms of physical contact, gender spaces, and educational approach as compared to Han dynasty. Such differences in gender structure between the two historical periods are clearly reflected in the discrepancies between Wang Xiang and Ban Zhao's writing in *Admonitions for Women*.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the common criticisms of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* as imposing controls over women and enforcing gender inequality, analysis of Ban Zhao's original writing and the Han society's context reveal that the text indeed provides practical strategy for women to survive the troubled Han society. Even more than that, its lessons of obedience and submission do not necessarily undermine a woman's position but instead, using "the softest...to overcome the hardest," such outward behavior of yielding and conformity can empower her by earning her the respect and favor from other people.¹⁷⁰ What's more, *Admonitions for Women* also unveils Ban Zhao's subtle hints at female empowerment and gender equity through her adoption of Confucian values traditionally intended for men and emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between husband and wife.

¹⁶⁹ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 160.

¹⁷⁰ Sommer, *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources*, 106.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that *Admonitions for Women* contributed to the feudal process of oppressing and strengthening controls over women. However, much of this detriment is attributable to the discrepancies between Ban Zhao's writing and Wang Xiang's annotation, which influences and misleads the understanding of Ban Zhao's original message. It not only reveals a male bias against women's self-value and position in the society, but also has important implication regarding the gender development from Han to Ming dynasty. The Neo-Confucianism's attempt to reconstruct and fortify Confucianism results in a lower position of women in Ming dynasty, with more rigid controls over the women and discrimination of gender in terms of both physical spaces and education. Although there were quite a few books by female authors, women still had such an insignificant voice in the society that their texts were twisted by male scholars for the sake of strengthening Confucian ideals of women. *Admonitions for Women* serves as a great quintessence, and the text definitely deserves a more complete and impartial evaluation from modern readers for a better understanding of Ban Zhao's message. No doubt, *Admonitions for Women* will continue to play a crucial role in the examination of gender construction in traditional Chinese society, particularly from Han's Confucian period to Ming's Neo-Confucian society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ban Gu 班固. *Hanshu* 汉书 3 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 北京: 中华书局, 1999.
- Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *Chinese Civilization: a Sourcebook*. Free Pr, 1993.
- — —. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- — —. "Women in Traditional China." *Asia Society*.
<http://asiasociety.org/countries/traditions/women-traditional-china>
- Gardner, Daniel K, and Xi Zhu. *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition*. Hackett Publishing Company Incorporated, 2007.
- Green, M Christian, and John Witte Jr. *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Hinsch, Bret. *Women in Early Imperial China*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.
- Huang, Siu-Chi. *Essentials of Neo-Confucianism: Eight Major Philosophers of the Song and Ming Periods*. Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Huang Yanli 黃嫣梨. *Nü si shu ji zhu yi zheng* 女四書集注義證. Shang wu yin shu guan (Xiang gang) 商務印書館 (香港), 2008.
- Huang Ze Cun 黃澤存. *Xin Shi Qi Diu Wai Xuan Zhuan Lun Gao* 新时期对外宣传论稿. Wu Zhou Zhuan Bo Chu Ban She 五洲传播出版社, 2002.
- Idema, W L, and Beata Grant. *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2004.
- Ko, Dorothy, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R Piggott. *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Lee, Lily X.H. *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women*. Wild Peony, 1994.
- Lee, Lily X.H, Agnes D Stefanowska, and S Wiles. *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity Through Sui, 1600 B.C.E.-618 C.E.* M.E. Sharpe, 2007.
- Lee, Yuen Ting. "Ban Zhao: Scholar of Han Dynasty China." *World History Connected*. February 2012. <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/9.1/lee.html>
- Liu, Shuxian. *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming*. Greenwood Press, 1998.

- Mann, Susan. *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- McLaren, Anne Elizabeth. *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*. Vol. 41. Brill Academic Pub, 1998.
- Mou, Bo. *History of Chinese Philosophy*. Routledge, 2009.
- Qu, Tongzu. *Han Social Structure*. University of Washington Press, 1972.
- Sharma, Arvind. *Women in World Religions*. SUNY Press, 1987.
- Smith, Paul Jakob, and Richard Von Glahn. *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2003.
- Sommer, Deborah. *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources*. Vol. 20. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Swann, Nancy L. *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A. D.* Russell & Russell, 1968.
- Taylor, Rodney Leon, and Howard Yuen Fung Choy. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Confucianism*. Vol. 1. The Rosen Publishing Group, 2005.
- Tierney, Helen. *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. Greenwood Press, 1991.
- Wang, Robin. *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period Through Song Dynasty*. Hackett, 2003.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=xQiJWZNQZfgC>.
- Watson, Rubie S, and Patricia Buckley Ebrey. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*. Vol. 12. University of California Press, 1991.
- Xia, Xiaohong. "New Meanings In a Classic: Differing Interpretations of Ban Zhao and Her Admonitions for Women in the Late Qing Dynasty." In *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, edited by J Tao, B Zheng, and S L Mow. "The" Feminist Press, 2004. <http://books.google.com/books?id=3X6CT51d8RQC>.
- Zhang, Mingqi. "The Four Books for Women: Ancient Chinese Texts for the Education of Women." *David C. Lam Institute for East West Studies*.
<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln471/fourbookwoman.htm>

**ON MY HONOR, I HAVE NEITHER GIVEN NOR RECEIVED ANY
UNACKNOWLEDGED AID ON THIS HONORS THESIS.**

Hang Dieu Nguyen

March 15, 2013