

Ban Zhao and the *Precepts for Women*

The Role of Confucianism in Shaping Women's Lives in China

Confucianism has often been identified as one of the main sources of gender inequality and of the subjugation of women in China throughout the ages (Li 2000; Bell & Chaibong 2009; Lee 1994), figuratively epitomized in the notorious late-imperial practice of foot binding (Wang 2000). One text in particular, the *Precepts for Women* (*Nüjie*), is considered to have played a determinant negative role in shaping the lives of women across Chinese history, as it would have contributed to further consolidating gender stereotypes and prejudices that were already deeply rooted in a fundamentally patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system and society (Rosenlee 2006; Hinsch 2002). The *Precepts for Women* is a brief pedagogic treatise in seven chapters, written in the early imperial period during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) by the renown female court historian and astronomer Ban Zhao (c. 45–116 A.D.). It is the first received extant example of a Chinese manual on feminine behaviour and has set a standard for a brand new literary genre of conduct books written *by women for women* (Swann 1932; Pang-White 2018; Raphals 1998), a fairly innovative concept in a society in which the composition of what was considered “serious literature” was largely a male prerogative. An unconventional figure of an emancipated, independent woman in the contemporary intellectual landscape, Ban Zhao often expresses highly conservative views that are to be considered quite extreme even for the *Zeitgeist* of early imperial China, if compared against everyday social and cultural practices. At the same time, she subtly pushes forward what seemingly is a hidden, ambitious progressive agenda, advocating for universal – and especially, equal – education for children of both sexes, and stigmatizing domestic violence. Consequently, the text is under many aspects controversial, and in certain passages even contradictory, showing several different layers of meaning, and a higher degree of complexity than what has long been acknowledged (Holmgren 1981). The *Precepts for Women* was later elevated to canonical status as it came to be included into a proper Confucian corpus of *Four Books for Women* (*Nü Sishu*). The text gradually acquired an increasingly prescriptive and normative value in the late imperial period, especially after the advent of Neo-Confucianism (12th cent. A.D.) and in particular during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). This later version of Confucianism promoted a much stricter and rigid moral code regulating female behaviour, which would eventually evolve into the cult of female and widow chastity and the glorification of female honor suicide (Ko 1995; T'ien 1988). The present talk problematizes the critical role played by the *Precepts*

for Women in determining the evolution of ideas and ideals of appropriate female behaviour that are still actual in China today, disentangling the different competing views on women it portrays. The talk further explores how both earlier forms of Confucianism and their later Neo-Confucian development influenced (and to a certain extent still influence) the role and the status of women within and without the court and the household, and their hierarchical role and status within the family (Slote & DeVos 1998).

Works cited

- Bell, Daniel A. and Hahm Chaibong**, eds. 2009. *Confucianism for the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinsch, Bret**. 2002. *Women in Early Imperial China*, Lanham, Boulder. New York, Toronto & Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Holmgren, Jennifer**. 1981, "Myth, Fantasy, or Scholarship: Images of the Status of Women in Traditional China." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 6: 147–170.
- Ko, Dorothy**. 1995. *Teachers of the Inner Chambers – Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lee, Lily Xiao Hong**. 1994. *The Virtue of Yin – Studies on Chinese Women*, Canberra: Wild Peony, Canberra.
- Li, Chenyang**. 2000. *The Sage and the Second Sex – Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*. Open Court, Chicago-La Salle: Open Court.
- Pang-White, Ann A.** 2018. *The Confucian Four Books for Women – A New Translation of the Nü Sishu and the Commentary of Wang Xiang*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Raphals, Lisa**. 1998. *Sharing the Light – Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang Lisa**. 2006. *Confucianism and Women – A Philosophical Interpretation*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Slote, Walter H. and George A. DeVos**, eds. 1998. *Confucianism and the Family*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Swann, Nancy Lee**. 1932. *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A.D.*, New York: Russell & Russell.
- T'ien, Ju k'ang**. 1988. *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity – A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Wang, Ping**. 2000. *Aching for Beauty – Footbinding in China*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.