



**WOMEN, GENDER and FAMILY
IN CHINESE HISTORY**

GENDER RELATIONS IN Ancient CHINA: SOME GENERALIZATIONS

- different and separate social roles existed for men and women
- Strong division between men's and women's social spheres
- Gender stratification more pronounced among upper-class, urban people
 - Gender divisions less rigid in impoverished rural areas
 - Families that struggled to survive mobilized both men and women for agricultural labor and various peasant household tasks



SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GENDER RELATIONS: FAMILY AS PRIMARY UNIT

- Family, not individual, was main organizing unit in Chinese society
- Filial piety as ideal principle for family life
 - Paternal authority
 - Fathers controlled property, income, children's marriage
 - Generally meant male domination over females
- Family imagined as microcosm of state organization
 - ⌘ Loyalty to paternal figure = loyalty to state
 - ⌘ Family structure represented hierarchical nature of Chinese political and social order



SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GENDER RELATIONS: CONFUCIANISM

- Confucius: lived from 551-479 BCE
- From a family of impoverished aristocrats; raised by mother in poverty
- Political context: Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-221 BC)
 - time of political chaos: Emperor ruled only as a honorary figurehead; in reality, Chinese territories ruled by different feudal lords
- Confucius wanted to bring order back to Chinese society



Picture source:

<http://www.biography.com/people/confucius-9254926>

CORE CONFUCIAN IDEAS

➤ **Xiao = Filial piety:**

- obligation to family significant
- Family as microcosm of the universe
- Strong relationship between fathers and sons extends to relationship between ruler and subjects

➤ **Ren = Humanity, reciprocity, empathy**

- Emphasis on collective good rather than individual benefits, need to act humanely towards others

➤ **Li = Ritual**

- Based on ancient Chinese religious traditions
- Heavy emphasis of ancestor worship as one aspect of filial piety
- Extends beyond official ceremonies of ancestor worship
 - Includes social relations: proper standards of behavior, and proper social conventions
- Significant for maintaining spiritual well-being and thus social order



CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY

- Author unknown, dated from early Han dynasty
- Allegedly the recorded conversations between Confucius and disciple Zeng Zi

“Since we receive our body, hair, and skin from our parents, we do not dare let it be injured in any way. This is the beginning of filial piety. We establish ourselves and practice the Way, thereby perpetuating our name for future generations and bringing glory to our parents. This is the fulfillment of filial piety. Thus filial piety begins with serving our parents, continues with serving the ruler, and is completed by establishing one’s character.”

Source: “The Classic of Filial Piety,” in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, 2nd Edition*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: Free Press, 1993), 64.



MORE EXCERPTS FROM THE CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY

“The proper relation between father and son is a part of nature and forms the principles which regulate the conduct of rulers and ministers. Parents give life –no tie is stronger than this. Rulers personally watch over the people –no care is greater than this. Therefore to love others without first loving one’s parents is to reject virtue. To reverence other men without first reverencing one’s parents is to reject the rules of ritual.”

Source: “The Classic of Filial Piety,” in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, 2nd Edition*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: Free Press, 1993), 66.



BOOK OF FILIAL PIETY FOR WOMEN

- Adaptation of Classic of Filial Piety, by Tang dynasty female writer (ca. 730 CE)

“Let me comment on the way a woman serves her husband. From the time her hair is arranged and she meets him [during the wedding ceremony], she maintains the formality appropriate between an official and the ruler. When helping him wash or serving him food, she maintains the reverence appropriate between father and child.”

- Source: “The Book of Filial Piety for Women Attributed to a Woman Née Zheng (ca. 730),” translated by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, in *Under Confucian Eyes Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, ed. Yu-Yin Cheng and Susan Mann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 57-58.





CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY IN PICTURE

Song dynasty era painting by Li Gonglin (ca. 1041–1106) illustrating the *Classic of Filial Piety*.

Source:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1996.479>



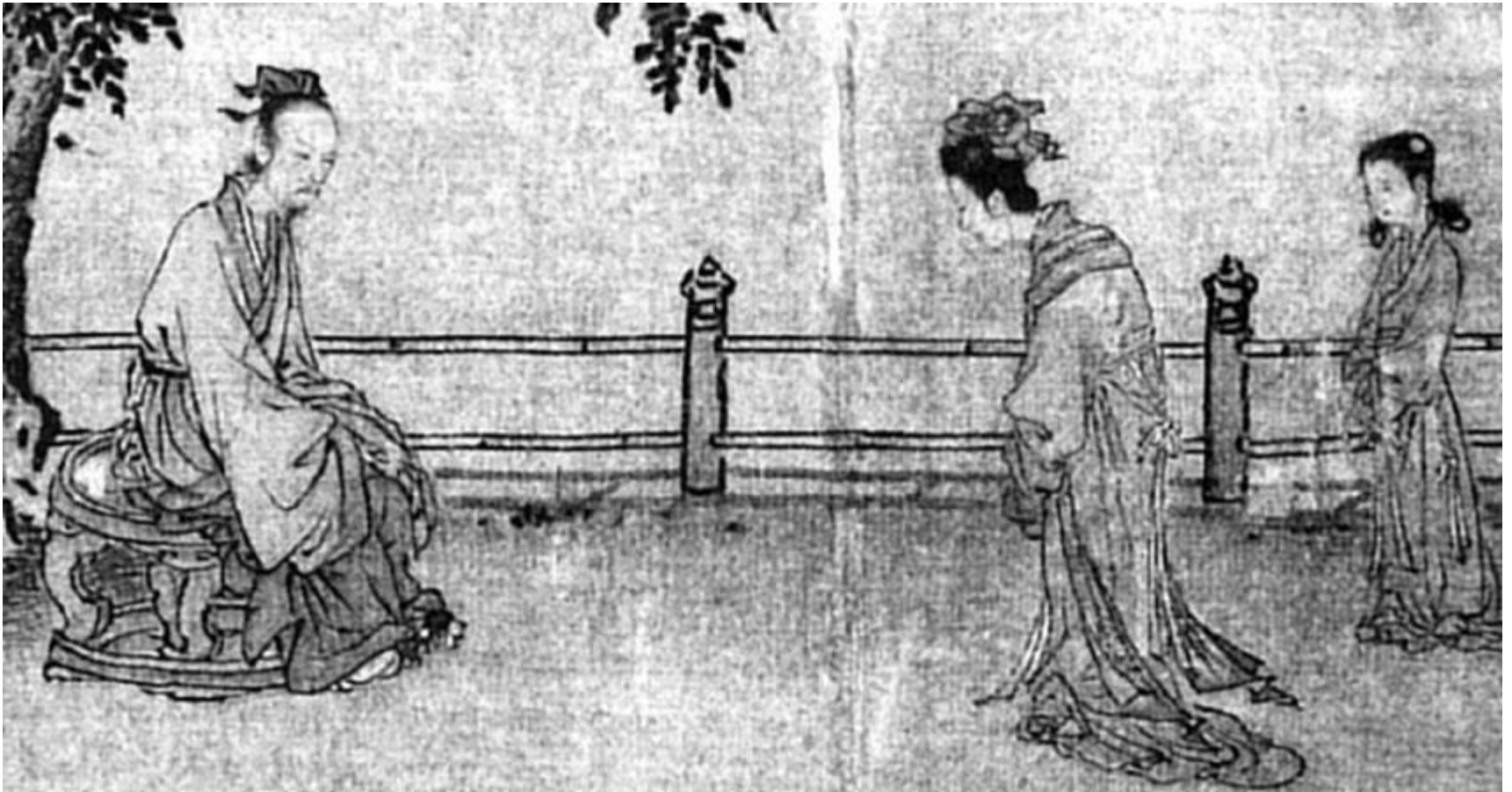


Illustration for *Book of Filial Piety for Women* (Source: Greg Smits, “Men and Women in Society,” from online textbook Topics in Pre-Modern Chinese History, accessed October 25, 2013.

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/g/i/gjs4/textbooks/PM-China/ch11.htm>



DAOIST COSMOLOGY AND GENDER ROLES

- **Daoism:** ancient Chinese idea that following the way (the dao) of nature and the universe led to harmony
 - Concepts originated as early as 6th century BCE and further developed as specific school of thought ca. 100 BCE
- **Yin and Yang**
 - Daoist idea that opposite forces coexist to provide balance in nature
 - **Yin:** association with femininity, darkness, passive behavior, weakness
 - **Yang:** associated with masculinity, strength, power, action, brightness



A WOMAN'S LIFE IN PRE-MODERN CHINA

- Marriage arranged by father
- Once married, moved in with husband and his mother (woman's mother-in-law)
- Place in household hierarchy depended on whether she was a primary wife or a concubine (secondary wife)
- Had little to no economic independence outside of family structure
- Primary functions
 - ✧ Perform household tasks
 - ✧ Produce offspring (preferably sons)



CHANGES IN GENDER ROLES from TANG (618-906 CE) TO MING DYNASTY (1368-1644 CE)

- **Education:** some daughters of scholars and officials learned to read and write
 - ∞ Women from peasant families still illiterate
- **Public life:** women from elite families played larger public role
- **Economy:** some peasant women earned extra income by making and selling crafts at local marketplaces
 - ∞ Supplement income of a financially struggling farming family
- NOTE: Powerful women like [Empress Wu](#) (630-705 CE) were still the exception rather than the norm





CONCUBINES

- Married men (usually from middle or upper class) could bring other women into the household in a subordinate, quasi-marital relationship
 - ✧ Song Dynasty onward: legal distinction between wife (primary wife) and concubines (secondary wives)
- Concubines often came from impoverished families
- Primary wife outranked concubines in family hierarchy and legal status
- Practice of taking concubines made family relations (especially among females in a household) more complex
 - ✧ Cooperation, indifference, and conflict between women
 - ✧ Wives who suffered from abuse from husband sometimes took out their anger on concubines



FOOTBINDING

- Originated in Sui dynasty (581-618 CE)
- Practice of binding young girl's feet with strips of cloth to modify their shape and size
 - small feet considered a sign of beauty and refinement
- Initially only popular among elites
- Eventually spread to all social strata by 17th century
 - ∞ Peasants' dilemma: binding a daughter's foot increased her chances of marrying into wealth, but peasant families could not afford to sacrifice daughter's ability to perform manual labor



Image of a foot deformed by foot bindings.

Source:

<http://library.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/imagesa/boundfoot-1.htm>



RECAP: CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES IN CHINESE SOCIETY

- Chinese gender roles strongly influenced by Confucian ideals and beliefs in cosmology
- Chinese thinkers constructed pattern of behavior expected of women, based on their interpretation of classical Confucian texts
 - Girls subordinated to boys
 - Wives subordinated to husband
 - Mothers subordinated to adult sons



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