

# Confucian Humanism and the Importance of Female Education: The Controversial Role of Ban Zhao<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The problem of the relation between the female gender and Confucian humanism is far more complex than it seems to be on the first glance. Especially if we consider the many misogynistic phenomena we can encounter in the course of Chinese history, such as foot-binding or the concubinage, we might be inclined to think that female philosophy was impossible in traditional China. This paper aims to challenge the standard views on this problem. It aims to shed some light on the fact that in this context we have to differentiate between classical teachings that were relatively egalitarian in nature, and later ideologies that more or less openly promoted the inferior position of women in society. The paper will analyse the work of the female Han dynasty scholar Ban Zhao (45–117 CE), who was the first well-known female thinker in the history of Chinese philosophy. Through this analysis, the author also aims to expose the contradiction between dominant conventions on the one hand, and latent, often hidden criticism of gender relations in female writings of traditional China on the other. In this way, the paper aims to promote a more culturally sensitive approach to the historical and conceptual study of gender discourses in China by connecting textual analyses with actual and comprehensive knowledge of the historical and social contexts in which they were placed.

**Keywords:** Chinese gender studies, women in Chinese history, Confucian humanism, Female philosophy, Ban Zhao

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## Konfucijanski humanizem in pomen izobraževanja žensk: kontroverzna vloga Ban Zhao

### Izvleček

Problem odnosa med ženskim spolom in konfucijanskim humanizmom je veliko kompleksnejši, kot se zdi na prvi pogled. Če upoštevamo številne ženskomrzne pojave, s katerimi nas sooča kitajska zgodovina in h katerim sodita, denimo, povezovanje stopal ali konkubinacijo, bi lahko dobili vtis, da ženska filozofija v kitajski tradiciji ni mogla obstajati. Pričujoči članek prevprašuje takšno uveljavljeno stališče. Opozarja, da je treba tudi v tem pogledu razlikovati med egalitarnostjo izvornega konfucijanskega nauka in poznejšimi konfucianističnimi ideologijami, ki so odkrito zagovarjale manjvrednost žensk. Avtorica analizira delo učenjakinje Ban Zhao (45–117 n. št.) iz obdobja dinastije Han, ki je znana kot prva mislica v zgodovini kitajske filozofije. S to analizo želi med drugim opozoriti na protislovje med prevladujočimi konvencijami na eni strani ter na latentne in pogosto prikritke kritike spolnih razmerij pri ženskih delih na drugi. Namen članka je spodbujanje kulturno bolj rahločutnih pristopov k zgodovinskim in vsebinskim študijam spolnih diskurzov na Kitajskem s pomočjo besedilne analize ter aktualnih in celovitih znanj in družbenih kontekstov, v katere so ti umeščeni.

**Ključne besede:** kitajske študije spolov, ženske v kitajski zgodovini, konfucijanski humanizem, ženska filozofija, Ban Zhao

### Introduction: The Present Situation

In his book *Distant Observation* (守望的距离) the respected contemporary Chinese philosopher Zhou Guoping wrote: “Women participating in philosophy causes great harm both to philosophy and to women. 女人搞哲学，对于女人和哲学两方面都是一项损失。” (Zhou 2003, 325)

This quote has become rather famous over the last few years, and spread across the world of Chinese academia in general. Quite a few Chinese women who write their own work and are working in the field of philosophical research are often met with sarcastic smiles of male colleagues who wink at them and quote Zhou Guoping, instead of engaging in a theoretical debate with them and their ideas.

This sort of patriarchal discourse of male theorists is, of course, based upon good intentions, since it is clear that philosophy is a male domain precisely because it uses a rigid terminological apparatus, complex concepts and thought puzzles which harm what supposedly lies at the very core of every “normal” woman: Her femininity (read: weakness), loveliness (read: naivety) and beauty (read: objectness).

Zhuo Guoping himself justified his opposition to women engaging in philosophy by saying:

Whenever I see a smart woman drowning in the labyrinth of conceptual speculations and speaking incomprehensible sentences, I cannot help but become sad. My heart hurts when I see a bright girl climbing to the peaks of metaphysics and shedding tears over its depth. Bad philosophy upsets us and good philosophy shocks us. Neither is good for female beauty. The fact that I am against women participating in philosophy actually derives from my regret of their loss of subtle eroticism and tantalising beauty.

看到一个聪慧的女子陷入概念思辩的迷宫，说着费解的话，我不免心酸。看到一个可爱的女子登上形而上学的悬崖，对着深渊落泪，我不禁心疼。坏的哲学使人枯燥，好的哲学使人痛苦，两者都损害女性的美。我反对女人搞哲学，实出于一种怜香惜玉之心。(ibid., 327)

The young Chinese female theorist Jia Cuixiang has written that women working in this field naturally become shaken, as Zhuo's tone of reminds one of the silent, yet unmercifully serious threats of the dark, hidden guards, who attentively watch the gates that lead into the opulent palace of philosophical thought, and protect it from women, who are seen as being inherently profane and therefore strictly forbidden from entering (Jia 2004, 2). Jia continues and warns of the close connection between such points of view and the patriarchal tradition of China:

We encounter many problems when applying a more thorough analysis of such value judgments. Firstly, this is about the poisonous influence of feudal doctrines<sup>2</sup>, which have reigned long in Chinese tradition. In accordance with this tradition, a woman was truly a woman only when she respected womanly virtues and acted according to them.

Morals dictated that women should view being uneducated and untalented as strengths and should abide by appropriate regulations: "Do not show your teeth when smiling, when walking your skirt should stand still". Secondly, these viewpoints are a reflection of the image of a woman created by a man within a patriarchal society. Since the end of matrilineal

2 The traditional Chinese socio-economic system in most cases is not feudal. The only time a system which could be compared to feudalism prevailed in Chinese society was in the period of the Western Zhou dynasty (around 1046–771 BC). However, contemporary Chinese intellectuals mostly still equate the traditional Chinese societal system arrangement with a feudal society. This is a case of the unreflected adoption of Marxist categories, which were established in accordance with the development of European societies.

tribes, there is a dominance of patrilineal social order in which men take up the central and primary position. That is why the decision on what a woman should be like is always made by men. Nonetheless, most men are still of the opinion that a woman should be gentle, loving and humble. A lot of women still inhibit their potential and repress their talents. No wonder we became a second-grade gender and we still are neither equal nor independent. We are still subjugated by and belong to the first-grade gender, men. We are defined by the roles of mothers, daughters and wives. And yet these are roles acquired in societies created by men. This also undoubtedly holds true.

事实上，仔细分析一下对女人的这种价值判断，就会发现有许多问题。第一，当然是中国封建礼教的长期遗毒的影响。什么“女子无才便是德”，女人要遵守妇道和妇德，要坐有坐样，走有走样，“笑不露齿，行不动裙”，这样才象一个女人。其次，是父权社会中男性对女性的塑造。自母系氏族社会解体以来，人类社会就一直是以男性为中心地位的父亲社会。女人应该怎样，这取决于男性的价值判断。在大多数男人的眼里，女人应该是温柔的、可爱的、娇小的等。女人为了博得男人的欣赏和欢心，也会努力地把自己的天性压抑住，塑造成男性喜欢的样子。所以波伏瓦才会说，女性是第二性的，她从来没有取得过与男性独立、平等的地位，她从来都附属于第一性——男性。女人的母性、女儿性、妻性等都是后天的、被男性社会所塑造出来的。此话有一定的道理。(ibid., 3)

All of these factors naturally contribute to the fact that only a few women decide to study philosophy. This is because the prevailing opinion in modern society is still that philosophy is not suitable for women.

We often hear people advising women to pursue the study of Chinese literature and culture, foreign languages, marketing or law. These are supposed to be good subjects which are suitable for women, since they adhere to feminine tenderness and vitality. The decision to study philosophy is seen as unwise, or even frightening.

常听人们谈到，作为一个女孩最好去学中文、外语、贸易、法律等专业。专业好又具有女孩子气，似乎这些专业更适合女性温柔、灵活的气质。而学哲学则被看作是一个不明智的，甚至是可怕的选择。(ibid.)

## Discrimination of Women in Philosophy—A Global Problem?

Of course, the view set out by Zhou Guoping is also a reflection of conservatism, which has been spreading across the whole of China in the last two decades. Nevertheless, China is no exception in this regard, as the proportion of women in philosophy remains low even in the most advanced societies of the West.

In Europe, for example, the number of women who work in the field of philosophy is “alarmingly low” (Anderl 2013, 1), and the situation is similar on other continents of the “developed world”. The American sociologist Kieran Healy investigated the ratio of women who received doctorates in different disciplines in the United States in 2009, and the results showed that the least women received them in the field of philosophy (see in Anderl 2013, 1). It turned out that the percentage of women with doctorates in philosophy is even smaller than the percentage of women in other subjects traditionally considered as being “male”, such as math, chemistry or astrophysics. This inequality is also reflected in the amount of academic employment. Only 21 percent of philosophers in the USA are female, and the same goes for the UK. To put this in context, just under half of all university professors in America are female, and thus they are strongly underrepresented in philosophy.

What are the reasons why it is harder for women to gain recognition in the field of philosophical research? While there are several answers to this question, they remain at the level of speculation.

One supposition, according to which women think differently than men, as supported by philosophers such as Hegel or Schopenhauer (and which is, by the way, also supported by many feminist theoreticians, albeit on a value-neutral level), cannot be empirically proven. On the other hand, there are a number of well-grounded psychological studies which imply the existence of implicit prejudices and stereotypes, such as, for example, the notion of “subtle incompetence”.

Such ideas are extraordinarily powerful in science and philosophy, and recent studies<sup>3</sup> have shown that members of certain social groups in which such prejudices prevail display less efficiency, as their knowledge of these prejudices influences their concrete actions in the sense that they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Perhaps it is not too unrealistic to expect that this sort of uncertainty influences women who work in the field of philosophy as well, as it is run by white, heterosexual and able-bodied men. The effect of such psychological phenomena is perhaps one of the reasons why there are many discrepancies between the genders when it comes to the publication of philosophical articles in the most prestigious

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3 See for instance Altanian (2018, 3), and Anderl (2013, 14).

academic journals. The female philosopher Sally Haslanger compared the number of male and female authors who have published an article in one of the five most important philosophical journals in 2005. She found that 95.5 percent of articles published in the leading philosophical journal *Mind* were written by male authors. Only in one of the five issues was the number of female authors comparable to the number of women employed in departments and institutes of philosophy (Haslanger 2005, 30). If we put the assumption that women are naturally worse at creating good theories aside, there can remain two possible reasons for such numbers. Women are either publishing fewer articles, or the reviewers are holders of (unconscious?) gender prejudices, as Haslanger found (*ibid.*, 32) that the review processes for such papers are far from being completely anonymous.

Haslanger also found that the number of women working in the humanities is continually growing, and that the imbalances between genders in such subjects are already a lot smaller than in the natural sciences, with one exception: philosophy (*ibid.*). The Swiss Association of Women in Philosophy came to the same conclusion with regard to the situation in Switzerland (Altanian 2018, 2). Its president, the philosopher Melanie Altanian, also believes that the main reason for this is a widely accepted biologicistic prejudice according to which women are more emotional and men more rationally analytical.

It is thus no wonder that many women in philosophy work in the field of feminist philosophy, which has introduced many innovative foundations, concepts and theories into an academic field that remains dominated by men. Most of these female philosophers bring new feminist insights into the framework of traditional Western philosophical disciplines, including their analytical, continental and pragmatic traditions.

These new insights are often radical, as they include many interventions into the common ways of philosophical reasoning. By influencing traditional fields of theoretical work, which stretch from metaphysics, ethics, logic, phenomenology to epistemology and ontology, these female philosophers are introducing new concepts, perspectives and dimensions to them. In this way, they are not only changing the sub-disciplines in question, but also widening the horizons of philosophy itself. They touch upon themes which have hitherto belonged to the margins of philosophy, without being treated by anybody.

Some examples of such new approaches are linked to the concept of the body, to discrepancies between social classes, to the division of labour, disability, family, reproduction, the self, sexual work, human trafficking and sexuality. They also bring a specific, feminist outlook to the discussion of questions regarding the problems of science, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism.

## Chinese Philosophy and Confucian Humanism through the Lens of Gender Studies

All this sheds a different light on the main topic of this article, which deals with women in Chinese philosophy and their role in shaping Confucian humanism. Against this background, it becomes clear that female philosophers in China are not only limited by the gender prejudices of their own, Chinese culture, but also by those which have wider universal and global dimensions. Despite this, it is mainly the traditional Chinese patriarchy which defines and conditions most of their activities. In the following parts of this paper, I will therefore first introduce the culturally conditioned features of this specific form of patriarchal order, and explore the role of women in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

If we think of all the infamous manifestations of the oppression of women, such as foot-binding or concubinage, one might think that female philosophy would be an impossibility in premodern China. However, the question of the connection between the female gender and Chinese philosophy is far more complex.<sup>4</sup> While the pre-Qin classics (including Confucianism, as the most recent studies and interpretations show) actually supported the ideas of gender equality and promoted equal opportunities for education, many later periods brought restrictions and increasingly rigid limitations to women's access to learning.

Quite a few contemporary researchers believe that the long-lasting presumption of the inherent sexism of classical Confucianism is both too superficial and outdated (e.g. Pang-White 2009, 1–2). The opinion that Western feminist theories are not an appropriate tool to understand the structures of sexual relationships and the value of women in classical Chinese discourse is also widely held (Kim 2014, 396–97). Instead, most theoreticians promote a more culturally sensitive approach, which would connect textual analyses with actual and comprehensive knowledge of the historical and social contexts in which these discourses were placed.

If we follow the assumption of Simone de Beauvoir, according to which a woman is not born but becomes one, then we first have to understand the symbolic and societal meaning attached to the term “Chinese woman”, in the sense of a sexual as well as a cultural being. If we assume that every culture is vital and that the social construction of gender is both social as well as cultural, then it becomes clear that the collective view of the foreign “Other” through the lens of Western frameworks is not only an inappropriate tool, but also leads to the elimination of

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4 Even in the earliest Chinese mythology, the universe was created by two deities, namely a male (*Fuxi*) and the female (*Nüwa*) one (see for instance Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 48; Zhao 2019, 13).



the essence of the subject we wish to research. What is even worse is that by accepting this approach, we automatically accept the alleged superiority of Western culture, as it would serve as a kind of umbrella norm under which it is possible to conceptually subsume all other cultures regardless of their local and empirical particularities (Rosenlee 2006, 3).

In the Confucian *Analects*, for example, there are no sexist statements. Confucian humanism is based upon a presumption, which—similar to modern Western feminist theories—follows the approach of a cultural construction of social roles: by their innate qualities, all human beings are very similar to each other; but by their education they get to be wide apart. This clearly humanistic approach is based on a kind of social constructivism, according to which people are equal in terms of their biological disposition. At the same time, it reveals the meaning and potentially transformative function of education.

The only quote which could be interpreted as an expression of belittling women, and is therefore cited wherever there is a need to “prove” the patriarchal nature of original Confucianism, reads as follows:

The Master said: “Girls and servants are the most difficult to get along with. If you are too familiar with them, they lose their humility. But if you maintain a distance towards them, they become offended.”

子曰：「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。」  
(*Lunyu* s.d. Yang Huo: 25)

However, recent etymological and hermeneutical research shows that this is actually not about women or girls, but more likely about male and female servants, about farmhands and maids (e.g. Kinney 2017, 149–50). Such an interpretation implies that this statement does not have any sexist and patriarchal connotations.

Most scholars, however, agree that there was less sexual equality in later periods, the fault of which they attribute to Confucianism and Confucian ethics. Although this assumption is true to some degree, it is misleading. We must not forget the many differences between Confucianism as moral philosophy and Confucianism as a mainstream normative ethics. This differentiation was already established in the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), when the state ideologists under the leadership of Dong Zhongshu formed a new doctrine in which they took the teachings of original Confucianism, which were rather progressive for their time, and merged them with the despotic ideology of Legalism. In this way, the originally egalitarian Confucian teachings became a dogmatic Confucian state doctrine, and the philosophical questions of this once proto-democratic discourse were replaced



by rigid state-formed dogmas, which emphasized hierarchical differences between people and increased the authority of those in power. After the blossoming of the so-called Neo-Confucianism during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, the legitimisation of oppression—and with it, of course, the increasingly difficult position of women in Chinese society—were continuous factors that only became stronger over time.

Larger mass rebellions of women and their progressive male colleagues against such gender inequality and patriarchal Confucian ethics arose only much later, at the dawn of the modern age. These uprisings came into existence in the scope of the new cultural renovation, which mostly drew its potential from the Western mindset, and manifested itself most clearly in 1919, within the so-called May 4th Movement.

But before taking a closer look at what role women's philosophy had in this context, we need to return to the period of the beginning of the creation of patriarchal ideology, to the time of the Han dynasty and the periods that followed. The element of hierarchy in social positions, which was placed at the forefront of Confucian teachings by Dong Zhongshu, after the Han dynasty served as the basis of the new state doctrine, permeated by an ideology, which was supposed to guarantee order and peace in the new society of early medieval prosperity. These modified teachings subsequently served as the basis of state ideology.

## **The Changing Fate of Female Intellectuals in Chinese History**

As is well known, the relationship between men and women or the (superior) husband and (subordinated) wife was one of the five fundamental, rigidly hierarchical relationships within these teachings. During the Han dynasty, that is, during the period of the consolidation of a new social system which was based upon a linkage of political and economic power, the position of women was still relatively strong. It was not until the Song dynasty and the second reform of Confucianism that the prevailing morality began to exclude women from education and to cripple their feet with binding.

Therefore, it is not surprising that during the Han dynasty we can still find a woman (Ban s.d., 45–117) whose intellect was so extraordinary that it was even recorded in the official Confucian historiography, which normally ignored any intellectual achievements of women. In all likelihood, however, this is not so much due to the greatness of her intellect, as due to the fact that this woman knew how to use it for the benefit of the new, rigid Confucianism and, ultimately, also in

favour of the emerging patriarchy. This is clear in the very title of her most famous work, *Lessons for Women (Nü jie)*, which will be treated more in detail in the next section of the present paper.

In contrast to the official Confucian doctrine, which propagated a strict, patriarchal social hierarchy, Daoism based itself on incomparably more egalitarian assumptions. The equality of men and women is also one of the more notable peculiarities of the Daoist religion. Because of these characteristics, its theological system differed greatly not only from the state doctrines and corresponding ideologies, but also from all other influential religious systems:

In many worldwide religions, we see a tendency to devalue or even exclude women. Daoism, however, has treated women with respect; and that is one of its most obvious peculiarities, which distinguishes it from most other religions. Daoist practice and theories offered women a key to spiritual transcendence and independent decision making over their fate. Women in Daoism had completely the same opportunities for education as men. Therefore, in Daoism, women could also become “enlightened masters”. (Li 2004, 3)

A lot of women engaged in Daoist theory and practice in different periods of Chinese tradition, and many of them left numerous written works, which have mostly been forgotten. Moreover, since we cannot (especially from the Daoist titles) determine the gender of authors whose biographies we do not have, there are probably a lot more female Daoist authors than the official intellectual history of Chinese tradition leads us to believe. As Li Suping (2004, 4) wrote about traditional China: “Many women have studied and practiced Daoism, but their theories have not been systematically researched as of yet”.

Of course, these female Daoists also focused on writing works that were specifically meant for women, which—unlike the earliest holy texts of folk Daoism—acknowledged the differences in Daoist theory and practice defined by gender. Here, we cannot forget the female Daoist master Sun Bu’er (1119–1182).

Since the possibility to achieve enlightenment is given both to men and women, many such works discuss the peculiarities of a female practice of the Way. Works such as *Nü jin dan (The Golden Female Principle)*, *Kun yuan jing (The Classic of Female Oneness)*, *Kundao gongfu cidi shi (Philosophical Poetry for Achieving the Spirit of the Womanly Dao)*, *Sun Bu’er er yuanjun fayu (Quotes of the Honourable Master Sun Bu’er)* and many others. These texts focused on the specific conditions of women and took into account their physical and mental characteristics.

Here we also have to mention the work of Wei Huacun (252–334), one of the most famous female Daoist masters from the period of the Six dynasties, in spite of the fact that her works were only stored in the closed archives of Daoist temples, and thus difficult for the public to access. However, for now let us mention a few more names of some other influential female Daoist masters of this period: Wu Cailuan, Fan Yunqiao, Cui Shaoxuan, Tang Guangzhen, and Zhou Xuanjing, among others (see Cleary 1989, 12). Most of them are not famous only for their theological writings (such as were written by Wei Huacun), but also for their philosophical and cosmogonic poetry, similar to those typical of Laozi's *Classic of the Way and its Virtue (Daode jing)*.

The period at the beginning of the development of the Neo-Confucian doctrine was responsible for many practices that were harmful and hateful towards women. However, even though such practices as foot-binding existed in this period, we can still find many creative as well as influential female scholars and thinkers from this time.

Although Neo-Confucianism was undoubtedly the main discourse which prevailed in official ideational history after the Song period, there were also many Buddhist and Daoist works produced by women in China during this time. However, they stayed in the shadows of official historiography. Mostly these philosophical works were elaborating upon classical and popular Daoism and its syntheses with Buddhist influences. In the field of the development and specific upgrades of Confucian ethics, it is also important to note the work of the following three of the female authors: Song Ruoshen (768–820), Song Ruozhao (761–828) and Empress Xu (1362–1407) of the Ming dynasty.

The feminist questioning of the traditional patriarchal society in China, as well as everywhere else in the world, began in a more organized and systematic sense only at the beginning of the modern age. Individual, quite influential feminist thinkers, such as the progressive female writer and activist Qiu Jin (1875–1907), wrote on many important feminist issues. She warned of oppression and criticized the unequal status of women as early as the 19th century.

Together with Xu Zihua (1873–1935) she founded the journal *Chinese Women's News (Zhongguo nü bao)*. She was involved in the organization of many revolts and rebellions against the corrupt Qing dynasty, and championed equal rights to education and employment. She was sentenced to death and shot because of her activities against the state in 1907.

A significant role in raising awareness regarding gender conditioned discrimination of women was played by Lu Xun, one of the greatest progressive writers

of the modern age. The liberation of women represented one of the important goals of the May 4th Movement (1919), which some scholars equate with the beginning of the Chinese Enlightenment. Another important fighter for women's rights was the female anarchist He Zhen (1884–ca. 1920), the life of whom we will take a closer look at next.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), the women's movement became integrated into the framework of the Chinese Women's Association (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhe hui* 中华全国妇女联合会), which—of course in accordance with state decrees—worked for the promotion of state policies on women and family, while at the same time protecting the rights of women within the governmental institutions. Although in its concrete practices this official organization mostly still reproduced the dominant position of men, we can find in this period several individual female writers who tried to approach the analysis of gender-based inequality through the lens of serious philosophical questions. Here we have to mention the case of Li Xiaojiang (born in 1951), a female Marxist theorist who worked on the history of women's theory from the perspective of historical materialism. She is also known as the founder of women's studies and women's philosophy in modern China. Alongside her work concerning the historical analysis of women's movements, she also became famous as one of the first female feminist philosophers who strove for the illumination of the specific characteristics of women's position in China, and for the creation of new paradigms based on the differentiation between the achievements as well as needs of Western and Chinese feminism. As such, in many of her works she revealed that in traditional China the social construction of gender was already seen as a self-evident, natural fact. She also showed that in many respects Chinese women were less radically discriminated against than women in the West. Among other ways, she showed this with a philological analysis of Chinese characters that designate different genders.

In contemporary China, many feminist groups are active within non-governmental organizations, and also within lesbian groups, which work within the Chinese LGBT Association. However, all such organizations still operate under considerable of pressure from the government, which in recent years further increased its efforts to make clear that the “real” liberation of women was their fulfilment within harmonious family life.

As such, in the last few decades the idea of a woman as an autonomous political subject has been much more strikingly developed in Taiwan. However, the philosophical dimensions of such female autonomous subjects are even there met with many still remaining prejudices deriving from the Chinese patriarchal tradition.

## The Paradoxical Role of Ban Zhao (45–117)

Ban Zhao was primarily a historian, who completed a large part of the official *History of the Western Han Dynasty* (*Han Shu*), which was started by her brother Ban Gu (32–92). Ban Zhao finished the missing parts of the book, mainly the last eight chapters; she also included an extensive genealogy of the imperial mother, and much additional information, which had hitherto not been preserved or recorded. Later she also wrote the *Discussion on Astronomy* (*Tianwen zhi*) together with Ma Xu, who was a student of her father. The inclusion of this work marked the completion of the *History of the Western Han Dynasty*, one of the most important works of traditional Chinese historiography.

She was also an excellent mathematician, astronomer, poet, rhetorician, essayist and writer. Sadly, most of her work did not survive. Alongside all of this, Ban Zhao also engaged in ethics, and is most renowned as the author of the most famous Confucian book for women, namely *Lessons for Women* (*Nü jie*).<sup>5</sup>

Ban Zhao was born to an upper-class family in Anling, next to the town of Xianyang in today's Shaanxi Province as the daughter of the famous writer Ban Biao and the sister of the historian Ban Gu. She was the grandniece of the important female intellectual and poet Ban Jieyu (ca. 48 BC–ca. 6 BC). Ban Zhao was a quick learner and became a real bookworm in her early youth. She married when she was fourteen, but her husband died relatively early. After his death she did not remarry, but instead dedicated her life to reading, writing and art.

Her *Lessons for Women* is a booklet that included regulations of Confucian ethics and generally advised women to be humble and respectful in order to contribute to the preservation of harmony in their families. She proceeded from essentialist gender definitions, such as the following one:

From their birth on, men are like wolves, always afraid of being too lame.  
From their birth on, women are like mice, always afraid of tigers.

生男如狼，犹恐其尪；生女如鼠，犹恐其虎！(Ban s.d., III)

On the other hand, she also repeatedly stressed that women should be well educated, even if this was most often interpreted as a patriarchal virtue, as numerous later interpreters believed that Ban Zhao wanted women to study chiefly for the purpose of serving men. More accurately, she supported the notion of a woman who is attentive to the point of sacrificing her own position. The work was first

<sup>5</sup> Later on, this work was included in the so-called *Four Books for Women*, (*Nü si shu*). Therefore, *Lessons* had wide circulation in the late Ming and Qing dynasties.

meant for women of her own Zhao clan, but later it quickly began to circulate at the court, where it soon became one of the most popular and well-known books for women. Its popularity continued over many centuries; it was used as a kind of guidebook that was believed to contain the behavioural norms and appropriate spiritual orientation of women.

In the imperial library Ban Zhao taught Empress Deng Sui and several courtiers, and gained a considerable amount of political influence by doing so. The Empress and concubines called her Superior, and awarded her with many fine-sounding titles. The Empress often consulted Ban Zhao on matters of state after she became regent for the newly born Emperor Shang of the Han dynasty. As a sign of gratitude, the Empress employed both of Ban Zhao's sons as state officials. Ban Zhao was also the court librarian, the chief editor of several works that were published in court, and trained experts in other fields of intellectual work. In this occupation, she also organized and was vital in spreading Lu Xiang's renowned *Biographies of Famous Women*. She most likely also watched over the rewriting of manuscripts from bamboo slips to paper, which was invented at the time.

Her *Lessons for Women* are collected in their entirety as part of the *History of the Western Han Dynasty (Han Shu)*. Ban Zhao is described as an "exceptionally well educated and highly talented" person in the preface of this work (Rosenlee 2006, 103).<sup>6</sup> In the central chapter, "Four Virtues" (*Si de*), a virtuous woman is defined above all by strictly obeying the rituals that are ascribed to her gender, and by remaining within the boundaries of the "inner" (*nei*) sphere in both her actions and general way of life, meaning she should live her life within the four walls of the family home. This life, of course, demanded the knowledge of different household skills and was strictly separated from the "external" (*wai*) sphere. The latter, which remained reserved for the male gender, included trade, politics and other public activities. It was only much later, in the premodern Ming and Qing dynasties, that a more progressive reading of Ban Zhao's *Lessons* became prevalent among educated women.

These educated women openly, loudly and clearly opposed the then popular slogan which declared that virtuous women are those who have no talent (ibid., 104). With the help of excerpts taken from Ban Zhao's work, they aimed to prove that being talented was actually an important prerequisite for women to even comprehend the meaning, significance and the mysterious structure of the important rituals that guided life:

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6 Sabrina Ardizzoni (2020, 284) also notes that her *Lessons* belong to the oldest Chinese books on the ethical foundations of women.



But if we only educate men and not women, we will only hide and cover up the structural differences in rituality, prescribed to each of them!

但教男而不教女，不亦蔽於彼此之數乎！(Ban s.d., II)

Even though—as already mentioned—many later interpreters believed that Ban Zhao’s support for female education was only so that women could better serve men, such passages could also be interpreted in the sense of advocating gender equality in spite of the different social roles prescribed to man and women. According to Ban Zhao, all girls should study at least from the age of eight until the age of fifteen (ibid.).

Later female intellectuals also applied Ban Zhao’s concept of “female speech” (*Fuyan*)—which was understood for centuries as only a terminological guide for the speech of women—to women’s literature, and with that they gained access to the external sphere.

Numerous scholars also interpret Ban Zhao’s conservatism as an attitude which resulted from her high political position. Being a woman, she was *a priori* in danger. Her close relation with the Empress was of a very fragile nature, because the political influence of the two women could have been easily overcome with the excuse that women were not allowed to occupy such important positions in the “external” sphere. Her public acknowledgment of the allegedly inferior or inherently subordinated position of women would—according to such interpretations—function as an expression of loyalty towards the patriarchal state, in which Ban Zhao occupied one of the highest positions.

On the other hand, we cannot forget the fact that *Lessons for Women* was the first work in Chinese history which explicitly called for the literacy and education of women (ibid., 106). If we evaluate this fact by considering the social and ideological context in which the book was written, it quickly becomes clear that it included very progressive, and perhaps even radical and revolutionary ideas, since one of the main Confucian classics, the *Book of Rituals*, (*Li ji*) openly states that only male children should be educated.

Precisely the radicalism of her argument, which advocates women’s literacy, is something fundamentally different from the otherwise conservative *Lessons*. This inconsistency always pushed intellectuals and researchers into the problems China faced in the past into constructing a coherent interpretation of the intentions that actually lead Ban Zhao to write this guidebook (ibid.).



## Epilogue: Revealing New Images of Chinese Female Philosophers

Undoubtedly, Ban Zhao's fight for the education of women had a great influence on later generations in China. Her work is also important in the framework of Confucianism, because it helped to eliminate the discriminative prejudice of the contradiction between talent and female virtue, which were defined in the *Lessons* as being mutually complementary and positive attributes of morally irreproachable and successful women.

On the one hand, Ban Zhao's work reveals the egalitarian and humanistic elements within the classical Confucian discourses. On the other, it points to the fact that the story of Chinese female philosophers is not entirely black and white. Far from being silent, Chinese female philosophers have often engaged in the discipline throughout history. However, similar to the situation in numerous other regions and cultures, the women philosophers of China have been unjustly ignored in the prevailing narratives of the history of philosophy. Revealing their images and studying their work will thus certainly help us to transform our current conception of philosophy as a "white" and "male" discipline.

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