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Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness: Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women*

Lin-Lee Lee

For centuries Chinese women have been trained to Sanchung Side or "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," as set forth in Nüjie, 女誡 (Lessons for Women), written in 106 CE by Ban Zhao, 班昭,[1] during the East Han Dynasty.[2] This essay reinterprets the oldest extant and most important female conduct manual in Chinese in order to question the traditional view that Ban silences Chinese women. It argues that Western feminists' approach to the idea of agency is not appropriate to understanding Chinese women's agency. It delineates a different concept of agency, based on Lessons for Women, forged out of the powerlessness of individual women, which is familial, communal, indirect, and conferred by others. In addition to expanding rhetorical scholarship on agency, I demonstrate that Ban's embedded concepts of familial agency are well illustrated by the 20th-century Taiwanese First Lady Chiang Fang-liang, a Russian Communist who married Chiang Ching-kuo, eldest son and heir of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, who followed Ban's precepts to transform her perilous situation into an honored and respected life role.

Keywords: Ban Zhao; Chinese Women's Agency; Familial Agency; First Lady Chiang Fang-liang; Lessons for Women

What Constitutes a Chinese Woman's Agency?

Agency in the West

The term *agency* in the West has many meanings and invites differing interpretations. Burke (1969) defines agency as "a means and sometimes more substantially, as

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a way of life'' (p. 229). Campbell (2005) defines agency broadly as ''promiscuous and protean'' (p. 1). Accordingly, agency, complex and dynamic, can take many forms, is difficult to limit, and may involve reversals, which is particularly important because they suggest the possibility of alternative or expanded understandings of it.

In the West *agency* describes the use of words to exert power or influence. Because Western feminism generally arose out of Greco–Roman political theory and practice, its focus has been on women's entry into the public sphere, reflected in efforts to obtain citizenship and legal rights for individual women. Accordingly, as defined by Western feminists, agency has been individual, a view buttressed by the individualistic bias of the Western political tradition, generally hostile to collectivism expressed in protest movements and strikes, and the Protestant tradition, which emphasizes individual conscience based on personal interpretation of the Bible. That agency is individual is deeply rooted in Western rhetorical scholarship. Only in the late 1960s did critics and theorists begin to explore the social movements through which African Americans organized to struggle against slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching; women organized to gain basic economic, legal, and political rights; and factory workers fought for better wages, rest periods, sanitary facilities, and safety measures. Campbell (1989) reveals the ways in which the early U.S. woman's rights advocates pursued legal, economic, and political rights. Zaeske (2002) traces the development of U.S. women's sense of citizenship rights via antislavery petitioning: ''The narratives and signatures provided a discursive means not only to represent women's opinions on slavery, but to assert women's presence individually and collectively in political space'' (p. 156). Political agency embedded in antislavery petitioning prompted women to violate the norms of true womanhood and to advance their political rights in the public sphere.[3]

Agency in the Chinese Context

Individualistic agency is alien to the traditions of Southeast Asia, particularly the powerful cultural, social, and political traditions originating in China based on the writings attributed to Confucius, which emphasize social harmony and gender hierarchy, submission to one's betters and one's family, and the absolute superiority of males. Accordingly, women had no recognized existence as individuals. Their identities were submerged in the family, and their lives were controlled, first by their fathers, then their husbands, and finally, their sons. Male and familial dominance was perpetuated by emperors and warlords and in feudal patterns of control and ownership.

Chinese history is replete with female figures who exerted influence outside the home, particularly in family exigencies. Hua Mulan disguised herself as a man to take her elderly father's place in the army and later refused a government post to return to her family. Xie Daoyuan, a famous female poet of the East Jin Dynasty, defended her family when they were attacked by rebel soldiers. Xiao Chuo, empress of Liao Jinzhong, led soldiers against an invasion by the Song army on behalf of her sick husband. These extraordinary acts emerged in family crises, which legitimized women's temporary entry into male roles (Z. Wang, 1999).[4]

At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese culture included practices exclusive to women:

> It was women who had to suffer the pain of footbinding as a little girl; to be treated as a lesser being than her brothers . . . ; to bear intense apprehensions on her wedding day when she was sent to live forever after with a stranger's family; to endure unspeakable anguish when her husband or her father frequented brothels or brought home a concubine; to go through the pain of childbirth and the fear of giving birth to a baby girl . . . ; and to be excluded from the men's world. Regardless of her class background and geographical location, the chances for a Chinese woman to escape all of the preceding ''women's experiences'' were rare, because the gender-biased system was her way of life. (Z. Wang, 1999, pp. 364–365)

The term *feminism* did not appear in Chinese until the 1911 May Fourth New Culture Movement, which started among urban, elite, educated women and was initially stimulated by nationalism, not feminism. The ''new woman'' role was not widely embraced by the public, and 1911 feminism was short-lived. In 1950, the New Marriage Law was implemented, and Chinese women began to gain more rights. The Cultural Revolution, a nationwide convulsion from 1966 to 1976, attempted to wipe out traditional cultural values. Consequently, traditional male dominance was challenged in public and domestic settings, and ''the urban educated women of the Mao era enjoyed more institutionalized gender equality but far less political autonomy'' (Z. Wang, p. 362). In the post-Mao era, Chinese women were employed in unprecedented numbers. The ''Four Modernizations'' introduced in 1978 brought Chinese women new possibilities and problems. Unfair treatment at work and emphasis on the nuclear family resurrected the Confucian ideals of the good woman, advocating women's return to traditional roles in the family.

Although many traditional Chinese values have been challenged and replaced, vestiges remain in Chinese culture, including Taiwan, to the present. After the Communist takeover of China in 1949, Taiwan was ruled by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, then by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. The 1996 election in Taiwan, the first democratic election in any area of China, ended the Chiang dynasty. The marital-cultural conditions that had existed when *Lessons for Women* was written some 2,000 years earlier, however, persisted in the Chiang family. The woman who became First Lady Fang-liang married into this family, the sort of family that Ban understood and for whose women she wrote.

Western Women's Agency vs. Chinese Women's Agency

Western concepts of rhetorical agency are more complicated than a simple opposition to the conceptions of Chinese agency. Western scholarship as revealed by Campbell (2005) on the protean character of agency helps to define and identify a particular kind of familial agency that is distinctively Chinese in character. Individualistic agency differs from familial agency in three ways. First, most Western feminists presuppose the individualistic form of women's agency, defining ambition and power in terms of personal needs, whereas for the Chinese, women's agency is grounded in a collective, which defines ambition and power exclusively in terms of one's family or

nation. Second, unlike political agency for Western feminists, a Chinese woman's agency is located in the family, generated through submission and obedience to its members in order to obtain approval, status, honor, and respect from them and, ultimately, from the larger community. Ban urged women to abide by the traditional values of womanhood in which women practice humility, domesticity, dependence, submissiveness, and obedience. Agency for such Chinese women could be exercised only through promoting the well-being of the family, and women's ambition and power were exercised in and through the family. Third, because women's agency in the West tends to describe the use of words to exert power or influence, Western concepts of women's agency obscure that phenomenon as it emerges in Chinese society whose hierarchical system emphasizes traditional roles and institutions, and in which influence often is exerted through nonverbal artistry.

Accordingly, this essay proposes an alternative concept of agency, a familial agency originating in Chinese thought. Such agency is (1) communal, emerging out of individual powerlessness; (2) collective agency that accepts societal constraints; (3) implicit or indirect; (4) derivative and conferred by others; and (5) exerted subtly through silence or nonverbal behaviors.

Ban Zhao's Life and Work

Ban Zhao (48–117 CE) was born into a wealthy, educated family; her background prepared her to write conduct literature for women that would be acceptable to powerful males. The Ban family's connection to the imperial hierarchy established her credibility, and its contributions included outstanding scholarly and literary achievements. Ban's father, Biao, a military advisor, showed great interest in literature and history. Ban's twin brother, Gu, a historiographer, was the initial author of the *Hanshu* (*History of the Han Dynasty*). Ban's great aunt, Jieyu, was a model of womanhood whose unprecedented literary accomplishments inspired her niece.[5] Growing up in an educated, talented family, Ban was immersed in the learning of her time. Rare and precious books, duplicates of inaccessible palace manuscripts, given to her great-uncle by the emperor Cheng, supplied Ban with educational materials, uncommon for women of her time. Furthermore, she was exposed to the diverse philosophical schools prominent in her time, and the impact of Confucianism and Daoism was reflected in her *Lessons for Women.*

Lessons for Women

Ban's experiences at the imperial court also prepared her to write. As a consequence of her extraordinary talents, Ban played many important roles. She was given the honorable titles of *Dajia*, 大家, or *Dagu*, 大姑, polite terms for honored ladies in the palace (Swann, 1932).[6] Ban's claim to be a historiographer came from her work finishing the incomplete *Hanshu*, commanded by the Emperor He. She was named head of a select group of scholars ordered by Emperor Han Wu to rearrange, edit, and supplement *Biographies of Eminent Chinese Women.*[7] Ban won the title of teacher from the emperor, who ordered the empress and ladies of honorable rank to attend

her lectures on astronomy, mathematics, literature, history, and good manners. Her career as a political consultant began when the Empress Deng became regent and conferred with Ban concerning affairs of state.

Ban's literary works include *Han Fu*, narrative poems, commemorative writings, inscriptions, eulogies, argumentation, commentaries, elegies, essays, treatises, expositions, and memorials.[8] Ban's style was vigorous and straightforward, clear in exposition, moving in expostulation, and vivid in entreaty. Her persuasive skills were evident in her memorial to the Emperor Cheng on behalf of her brother Chao, who appealed for release from his political post owing to illness and old age. The emperor was moved and ordered his immediate return.[9] Ban was married at the age of fourteen to Cao Shishu, who died soon after; she remained a widow caring for her son and daughters and behaved in conventional, respectable ways (Chen, 1996; Swann, 1932).[10] Her status as a moralist resulted from her chastity in widowhood, and she was a model for Chinese women to emulate. Ban's exceptional family connections within the imperial hierarchy, access to male-oriented *Hanzi* or traditional Chinese education, work experience, and literary accomplishments equipped her to teach other women and to compose lessons in decorum that won admiration from women and gained respect from men.[11] For centuries, Ban's works have retained their prominence in Chinese literature, and her *Lessons for Women* has been widely read and has influenced subsequent conduct literature for Chinese women.

Lessons for Women

Previous studies of Chinese rhetoric have focused primarily on works by men (Garrett, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Jensen, 1987, 1992; Lu, 1994; Lu & Frank, 1993; Oliver, 1971; Xiao, 1995, 1996, 2004). Chinese women's rhetoric is rarely considered (Garrett, 2002; Lee, 2002, 2004; Lee, 1998). As for *Lessons for Women*, most scholars explore its literary qualities (Chang, 2000; Hou, 1986; Lee, 1994; Liu, 1995; Raphals, 1998; Wang, 1996); others reveal its biographical aspects (Ge, 1995; Hibbert, 1938; Kersey & Schrag, 1989; Wei, 1994). In the West, Donawerth (2002), the first scholar to consider the rhetorical significance of Ban's conduct manual, briefly summarizes her work without exploring its rhetorical elements:

> Her *Lessons for Women*, the earliest known treatise on the education of women, and the earliest extant writing on rhetoric by a woman, emphasizes domestic duties and the traditional gender role of Chinese women as serving men and family but it also presents the argument that girls must be well educated in order to serve. (p. 14)

Lessons for Women includes a preface and seven lessons on Humility, Husband and Wife, Respect and Caution, Womanly Qualifications, Whole-hearted Devotion, Implicit Obedience, and Harmony with Younger Brothers- and Sisters-in-law.[12] Chen (1996) writes that *Lessons for Women* "constitutes ideal womanhood . . . and provides a systematic set of instructions on how to educate unmarried girls to fulfill that role in an everyday context" (p. 229).

Lessons for Women cannot be understood or interpreted apart from the conditions of women at the time it was written, the latter half of the Han dynasty, known as the

Eastern Han (circa 600–200 BC). Hu (1925) wrote that during the Eastern Han Dynasty, customs and usages were reinforced through national codes of etiquette and enacted into imperial laws for the better ordering of society. When necessary, the Han philosophers and writers revised, edited, and reinterpreted the most significant doctrines of the Confucius-Mencius School, the Lao-Zhuang School, and the Mo School, among others.[13] This environment, including a revival of conservative Confucian doctrines, was hostile to women. Traditionally, Chinese concepts of gender reflect the yin/yang cosmological duality. This binary is often used to interpret the separate spheres of social relations (Garrett, 2002). This gendered ideology confined women to their residences and restricted their lives. Only two conditions permitted women to engage in traditionally masculine activities, such as receiving education or literacy training. First, if they were born into scholar-official families, they might be educated along with their brothers. Second, religious preachers or social outcasts, such as actresses and courtesans, would receive some training for religious chanting and performing. In conformity with the Confucian saying that women without talents were virtuous, most peasant women remained illiterate because education was irrelevant to their lives and jeopardized their marriageability. Only privileged women born into wealthy, educated families benefited from temporary relaxations on these restrictions.

The surviving works written in the 1,000-year-old female language *Nüshu* recorded the conditions of rural, illiterate Chinese women.[14] *Folksong before Marriage* described the life of a daughter at her natal home, showing that a woman's status before marriage was not as harsh as that of the wife's as a domestic servant who performed household chores under the critical eyes of her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law as revealed in *Folksong after the Marriage*. A *Nüshu* folksong elaborates: "A daughter eats from the dish. A daughter-in-law eats the leftovers. A daughter eats the chicken legs. A daughter-in-law eats the head and claws . . . . It is the hardest thing in the world to be a daughter-in-law" (Chiang, 1991, pp. 86–87). Deprived of status in comparison with men or female relatives, married women were treated as servants who were expected to obey others. Hence, being a daughter-in-law in a Chinese family placed a newly married woman in the lowest position in her new home, where she appeared worthless, powerless, pitiable, and dependent.

Familial Agency

Contrary to some earlier interpretations, I present the ways that Ban's *Lessons for Women* implies concepts of familial agency for Chinese women, forged out of initial conditions of extreme powerlessness, through which newly married women can find ways to exercise agency within their marital families in order to gain respect and influence in this somewhat hostile environment.

Familial Agency: Communal

Campbell (2005) indicates that external factors, including cultural conventions and beliefs, regulate and limit rhetorical agency, which is vividly illustrated in Ban's work.

Ban's form of agency is familial, based on an underlying gender ideology that ostensibly denied any individual agency to women. In Lesson 1 on "Humility," Ban reaffirmed the cosmology of yin/yang to emphasize adaptation to dominant views of gender:

> 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 to fear. (When a woman follows such maxims as these,) then she may be said to humble herself before others. (Swann, 1932, p. 83)

Ban affirmed sexual difference and male superiority. Likewise, Ban commented on the behaviors expected of a daughter-in-law: "Whenever the mother-in-law says, 'Do not do that,' and if what she says is right, unquestionably the daughter-in-law obeys. Whenever the mother-in-law says, 'Do that,' even if what she says is wrong, still the daughter-in-law submits unfailingly to the command" (Swann, 1932, p. 88). Furthermore, Ban recognized that a Chinese woman was completely identified with her marital family, a condition that extended into widowhood. In Lesson 5 on "Whole-hearted Devotion," she wrote: "Now in the 'Rites' is written the principle that a husband may marry again, but there is no Canon that authorizes a woman to be married the second time. Therefore it is said of husbands as of Heaven, that as certainly as people cannot run away from Heaven, so surely a wife cannot leave (a husband's home)" (Swann, 1932, p. 87). These principles reaffirmed a woman's lifelong fidelity to her husband and marital family. *Lessons for Women* recognized the obstacles that Chinese women faced and assumed that no agency in the Western sense was possible for them; a wife had to submit to her marital family.

Familial Agency: Learning to Accept Societal Constraints

In the cultural environment of the East Han Dynasty, the cosmology of yin/yang controlled cultural norms; the superiority of men over women and of the old over the young was assumed. Ban acknowledged the sexual inequality in Lesson 1: "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" (Swann, 1932, p. 83). Here she defined women's place, indicating that a girl was expected to practice humility, to be domestic, and to be responsible for ancestor worship. Ban advised a woman to subordinate herself for the sake of the family. This is often read negatively by scholars who claim that *Lessons for Women* contributed to the oppression of Chinese women owing to her advocacy of Three Obediences and Four Virtues. However, an alternative reading reveals that Ban taught Chinese women survival skills needed in a hostile environment.

Survival meant that a woman needed to be pious, domestic, humble, respectful, considerate, subservient, pure, quiet in spirit, and isolated from the outside world. Therefore, from early childhood, learning how to survive in the domestic sphere

was vital. The possibility of speaking even at home was drastically limited. Of more importance, learning to accept one's proper gender role was exigent. If a woman resisted her socially constructed roles, she would be endangered, lowering her status through loss of respect. In Lesson 3, "Respect and Caution," Ban reiterated the ideology of yin/yang and indicated its relationship to women's behavior:

> As *Yin and Yang* are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the *Yang* is rigidity; the function of the *Yin* is yielding. . . . If husband and wife have the habit of staying together, never leaving one another; and following each other around within the limited space of their own rooms, then they will lust after and take liberties with one another. From such action improper language will arise between the two. This kind of discussion may lead to licentiousness. Out of licentiousness will be born a heart of disrespect to the husband. Such a result comes from not knowing that one should stay in one's proper place. (Swann, 1932, p. 85)

Ban explained that men and women had separate life tasks and distinctive spheres. These differences should be respected in order to maintain a healthy relationship. Accordingly, a woman must acknowledge her place within the domestic sphere and adapt her speech to it:

> Furthermore, affairs may be either crooked or straight; words may be either right or wrong. Straightforwardness cannot but lead to quarreling; crookedness cannot but lead to accusation. If there are really accusations and quarrels, then undoubtedly there will be angry affairs. Such a result comes from not esteeming others, and not honoring and serving (them). (Swann, 1932, p. 85)

Ban used an ancient book, *Nüxian* (*A Pattern for Women*), to argue that women should learn to treat husbands as their most important audience: "To 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" (Swann, 1932, p. 87). In Lesson 5, "Whole-hearted Devotion," Ban discussed the evils of self-centeredness:

> If, in all her actions, she is frivolous, she sees and hears (only) that which pleases herself. At home her hair is disheveled, and her dress is slovenly. Outside the home she emphasizes her femininity to attract attention; she says what ought not to be said; and she looks at what ought not to be seen. (If a woman does such as) these, (she may be) said to be without whole-hearted devotion and correct manners. (Swann, 1932, p. 87)

Similarly, in Lesson 4, "Womanly Qualifications," Ban emphasized the significance of timing and suitable language: "To choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and not to weary others (with much conversation), may be called the characteristics of womanly words" (Swann, 1932, p. 86). Ban's advice concerns rhetorical sensitivity, strategic use of silence, and echoes sophistic concepts of *kairos* or timing and *to prepon* or the appropriate, illustrated by her instructions to wives to seek the right moment to speak "womanly words." She urged women "to love not gossip and silly laughter" (Swann, 1932, p. 86). Conventionally, Chinese women were educated to follow what their fathers, husbands, and sons told them to do; consequently, they went unheard. These passages mislead some readers

to conclude that Ban instructed women not to speak. A closer look, however, reveals that Ban instead urged women to use apt words at propitious moments. Womanly words did not silence women; rather, Ban encouraged them to speak strategically. Because Chinese wives had no individual power within the family, an important challenge was to accept gendered roles, to accede to the wishes of family members, to maneuver within familial constraints, and to discern those moments in which carefully chosen words might be heard and, perhaps, heeded.

Familial Agency: Indirect or Implicit

Unlike Westernized forms of agency, Ban's familial agency is indirect or implicit. Allegedly, Ban composed *Lessons for Women* to offer her unmarried daughters detailed instructions about how to behave appropriately in their husbands' families:

> But I do grieve that you, my daughters, just now at the age for marriage, have not at this time had gradual training and advice; that you still have not learned the proper customs for married women. I fear that by failure in good manners in other families you will humiliate both your ancestors and your clan. . . . As I have thought of you all in so untrained a state, I have been uneasy many a time for you. . . . In order that you may have something wherewith to benefit your persons, I wish every one of you, my daughters, each to write out a copy for yourself. (Swann, 1932, pp. 82–83)

Because Ban was 61 when this work was composed in 106 CE and her daughters were over 40 and far beyond marriageable age, these comments are puzzling. This fiction may have been a way to personalize a work addressed to all unmarried Chinese girls about how to adapt to a new and difficult marital environment.

Ban did not criticize men or challenge the gender hierarchy; instead, she reaffirmed traditional values for both sexes. In Lesson 2, ''Husband and Wife,'' she affirmed their complementary relationship: ''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 relationships'' (Swann, 1932, p. 84). Their relationship was based on mutuality: *Yin* and *Yang* became a metaphor to the equilibrium between men and women. It is startling that Ban advocated even limited education for women in order to create a partnership between husband and wife. Appealing to the classical texts *Rites* and *First Ode* in the *Book of Poetry* to support the need for women's education, she wrote, ''If a wife be unworthy, then she possesses nothing with which to serve her husband'' (Swann, 1932, p. 84). Education for women contradicted Confucianism, which held that the most virtuous woman was uneducated. The education Ban advocated was not detailed, but its goal was to foster good mothers and wives who could strengthen the family.

Because conditions at that time made significant social change in the conditions of women impossible, Ban argued that a woman should be educated to enable her to perform her tasks as an obedient daughter-in-law, a submissive wife, and an ideal member of her marital family. Education was not a means for female self-actualization or entry into the public sphere, but to prepare virtuous mothers who

would produce talented sons for the honor of the family. Simply put, a strong family began with a woman's education. When her behavior benefited the family, her status would improve, and she would be empowered.

Given the social discrimination and cultural conditions in China at that time, marriage was a given for women. In order to secure her marriage and improve her lowly position in her husband's family, a woman could consciously and strategically use obedience to gain approval from her husband and in-laws. Therefore, implicit obedience was a strategy—not an abandonment of dignity, but a means to improved status. Accordingly, Ban wrote:

> There are times when love may lead to differences of opinion (between individuals); there are times when duty may lead to disagreement. Even should the husband say that he loves something, when the parents-in-law say "no," this is called a case of duty leading to disagreement. This being so, then what about the hearts of the parents-in-law? Nothing is better than an obedience which sacrifices personal opinion. (Swann, 1932, p. 88)

Ban claimed that good marital relationships were based on the correct gender ideology, which laid the foundation for a partnership in which husband and wife collaborated to strengthen the family. Turning women's submissiveness into strength was Ban's underlying message, and ingratiating herself to her husband's family could only be accomplished indirectly. For Chinese women, forging agency began with indirection in handling domestic relationships. Accordingly, for Ban, familial agency—in this case, respect, honor, and higher status—could be achieved through indirection, a process by which women gained esteem in an environment that initially placed them in an almost wholly powerless position.

Familial Agency: Derivative and Conferred by Others

For Chinese women, agency comes in and through others and relies on family harmony. Ban devoted Lesson 7, "Harmony with Younger Brothers- and Sisters-in-law," to instructing women on relations with their husbands' families and the undesirable consequences of conflict:

> Although a woman possesses a worthy woman's qualifications, and is wise and discerning by nature, is she able to be perfect? Yet if a woman lives in harmony with her immediate family, unfavorable criticism will be silenced (within the home. But) if a man and woman disagree, then this evil will be noised abroad. Such consequences are inevitable. (Swann, 1932, p. 89)

Ban detailed ways that a woman benefited from family harmony:

> Then the excellence and the beauty of such a daughter-in-law become generally known. Moreover, any flaws and mistakes are hidden and unrevealed. Parents-in-law boast of her good deeds; her husband is satisfied with her. Praise of her radiates, making her illustrious in district and in neighborhood; and her brightness reaches to her own father and mother. (Swann, 1932, p. 89)

Maintaining harmony was essential in the marital family: "The correct relationship between husband and wife is based upon harmony and intimacy, and (conjugal) love

is grounded in proper union'' (Swann, 1932, p. 86). Family harmony was linked to happy marriage: ''In order for a wife to gain the love of her husband, she must win for herself the love of her parents-in-law, she must secure for herself the good will of younger brothers- and sisters-in-law'' (Swann, 1932, p. 88). An ideal woman acted in the family in ways that gained approval from the larger community.

In addition, familial agency required audience adaptation. As presented in Lesson 1, an ideal Chinese woman was modest, yielding, and submissive. In Lesson 6, ''Implicit Obedience,'' Ban instructed women to obey their parents-in-law and by so doing improve their status:

> Let a woman not act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of parents-in-law about right and wrong; let her not dispute with them what is straight and what is crooked. Such (docility) may be called obedience which sacrifices personal opinion. Therefore the ancient book, ''A Pattern for Women,'' says: ''If a daughter-in-law (who follows the wishes of her parents-in-law) is like an echo and a shadow, how could she not be praised?'' (Swann, 1932, p. 88)

A Chinese woman's agency emerged in her willingness to sacrifice personal opinions, a strategic way to win the hearts of her in-laws and to strengthen her status in her marital family. Ultimately, her agency was conferred by others. Ban wrote, ''Now for self-culture nothing equals respect for others. To counteract firmness nothing equals compliance. Consequently it can be said that the Way of respect and acquiescence is woman's most important principle of conduct'' (Swann, 1932, p. 85).

Familial Agency: Subtle Influence Through Silence or Nonverbal Behavior

The high value of silence and mistrust of speech still predominates in Chinese thinking. In exercising authority, who speaks and who remains silent and when they do so become extremely important; silence as well as speaking is rhetorical. Western scholarship on rhetoric and silence offers a way to include rhetorical artistry not widely recognized as part of the Western rhetorical tradition. Scott (1972) expounds the relations between rhetoric and silence, suggesting a dialectical tension between them. Seeking links between Western and Eastern thought, Scott (1993) writes in an ''Eastern'' way: ''It is an error to believe that speaking reveals and silence conceals. Indeed, that belief may be true, but its opposite may be true also'' (p. 2). Silence may be respect for or deference to someone's wisdom. Farrell (1999) explores silence as a woman's tool to communicate, persuade, and generate knowledge. Glenn (2004) reiterates that silence can be as powerful as speech in different contexts and subcultures:

> Silence as a rhetoric . . . serves many functions. . . . However, silence is often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power: when it denotes alertness and sensitivity, when it signifies attentiveness or stoicism, and particularly when it allows new voices to be heard. (p. 18)

Scholarship on silence shows how rhetorical artistry emerged in cultures, other than those of the West, which respect silence and taciturnity. In some Asian cultures silence is as valued as gold and does not signify absence of communicative power,

but a strategic choice that communicates respect, sensitivity, deference to authority, power, position, or more.[15]

Ban discussed a subtle, indirect empowerment conferred by others within the family. Consequently, a Chinese woman's influence often emerged out of nonverbal, symbolic practices consistent with constraints on her role: behavior was persuasive, a nonverbal, symbolic rhetoric. Womanly virtue, womanly words, womanly bearing, and womanly work enhanced whatever influence was possible. Because constraints were linked to the family, a wife's subtle impact was determined by how she influenced her family. If a woman lived according to the precepts of womanly conduct, she would create a harmonious life in which her husband would respect her, she would be admired by parents-in law and brothers- and sisters-in-law, her sons and daughters would thrive, and her life would be happy.

Ban, an educated woman, testified by her example that a woman could acquire *Hanzi* literary skills and still live an exemplary life. Her *Lessons for Women* instructed Chinese women how to create familial agency by employing all of their womanly arts to create a harmonious family environment. In what follows, I argue that in the 20th-century First Lady Chiang Fang-liang gained respect and honor in a hostile environment by abiding by Ban's doctrines of *Lessons for Women.*

From Faina Ipatyevna Vakhreva to Chiang Fang-liang

Born on May 15, 1916, in Yekaterinburg, Russia, Faina Ipatyevna Vakhreva was orphaned while young and raised by her older sister Anna Vakhreva. An outspoken member of the Communist Youth League, at age 16 Faina met Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek's eldest son, at the Ural Heavy Machinery Plant. They married 2 years later on March 15, 1935.

This was a time of upheaval in China. As Chang (1997) writes, "The decade of the thirties was a hard one for China" (p. 3). In the 1930s, Japan launched an undeclared war on China. As a step toward military domination of East Asia, in 1931 Japan occupied Manchuria, renamed Manchukuo, and installed Puyi, the last emperor, as puppet ruler. In 1935 parts of Chahar and Hebei were occupied; in 1937 Beijing, Tientsin, Shanghai, and Nanjing (Nanking) fell.[16] In 1937 Chiang Ching-kuo and Faina, along with their 1-year-old son, Chiang Allen, were permitted to leave Russia and go to China. They were received by Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang Kai-shek in Hangzhou and then traveled to Xikou, Zhejiang, where Chiang Ching-kuo's mother, Mao Fu-mei, lived and where they were married in a Chinese ceremony.

In 1937 China was not a propitious place for a Russian Communist woman, and the Chiang family made clear its displeasure at such a daughter-in-law. Chiang Kai-shek urged his son to divorce her because "a foreigner was not worthy to be the spouse of the emperor's son" (O'Neill, 2000). Faina had disadvantages that gave her the lowest possible status in her marital family. She was foreign, blonde, blue-eyed, tall, and spoke only Russian. She had been a devout Communist, the sworn enemies of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang Party he led. She had been

socialized as an athletic, outspoken woman, the antithesis of an ideal Chinese woman. She was in danger of being separated from her husband and her son if the Chiang family refused to accept her as their daughter-in-law. The process by which Faina Ipatyevna Vakhreva became Chiang Fang-liang, the wife of Chiang Ching-kuo, illustrates the wisdom of Ban's *Lessons for Women* as ways to overcome the almost insuperable challenges that she faced in gaining status in her traditional Chinese marital family.

Faina endured considerable pressure from the anti-Communist Chiang family. Inventing a new role for herself in the Chiang family was essential. Faina's transformation into a traditional Chinese woman began immediately upon her arrival in China, and her adjustment to her new life in the Chiang family progressed quickly. The discrepancy between Faina's old and new selves is evidence of her efforts to create what I have described as familial agency, a process in which she not only accepted all the societal constraints but also met the Chiang family's stringent demands. From spring 1937 to early 1938, she stayed with her husband's birth mother Mao Fu-mei in order to learn the traditional customs of the family and region. There is no direct evidence that Faina read *Lessons for Women*, but Mao Fu-mei would have transmitted its important principles to her daughter-in-law. Faina was assigned a tutor to learn Mandarin Chinese and the local Ningbo dialect; she learned to cook Ningbo food; she wore Chinese attire, read Chinese books, played mahjong, and developed an appreciation of Chinese opera and brush painting. She showed respect for Chinese religious rituals and followed the rules of courtesy expected of Chinese women. For more than 2 months Chiang Kai-shek observed how Faina treated her in-laws, followed her husband's orders, and cared for her son. He was impressed by his tall, blue-eyed, Russian daughter-in-law's gentle caring nature, which fulfilled the expectations for a good Chinese wife. He renamed her Fang-liang, a Chinese name meaning "righteousness and virtue" (Chan, 2005).

Fang-liang adapted quickly, believing that "the members of her husband's family were her own family members," as described in her husband's memoir (Chou, 1993, p. 123). She treated Madame Chiang Kai-shek as her mother-in-law, paying her the respect that she was due, visiting her during the Chinese holidays, and following the ritual practices expected of Chinese daughters-in-law. While talking to her birth mother-in-law, Mao Fu-mei, Fang-liang contrasted herself to Madame Chiang: "I never want to be like Soong Mei-ling. I have never wanted to step into the public affairs of the Chiang Family since the beginning. Women should not get involved in politics. My role is to bear children for my husband. If possible, I want to engage in some social work, but not to call attention to myself in public" (Dou, 1996, pp. 205–206). This statement implies that she had learned to accept a Chinese woman's duties to bear sons and remain modestly and humbly in the private sphere.

Fang-liang won admiration from Mao Fu-mei, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and the Chiang family for adaptation to the culture and expectations of the family. Reportedly, her behavior met expectations that would have been difficult for a Chinese woman reared in a traditional family. Before her marriage, Fang-liang was vivacious, outgoing, and outspoken; after marriage she became a virtuous, reticent, and

obedient daughter-in-law, mother, and wife, placing her husband's and children's needs above her own. On her 50th birthday, Chiang Kai-shek presented her with a calligraphic inscription that he had written, which read ''compassionate, filial, virtuous, and worthy,'' a signal honor and a testimonial to the generalissimo's admiration and affection for his Russian daughter-in-law.

Fang-liang rarely spoke in public. In 1954, in obedience to Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Fang-liang became the general director of the Armed Forces nursery school, and often took her own children there to join the activities. At the ceremony opening the nursery, she planned to deliver a manuscript speech; instead, she made these impromptu comments:

> As the general director of the Armed Forces, I will try my very best to manage the nursery. Please have confidence in me. I have been fond of children since my childhood. I not only love my own children but also those of others. I adore boys as well as girls. When I was in the Jiangxi Province, I loved the orphans, cooked them Jiangxi food and beef soup. Please have enough confidence in me to leave your children at the nursery. I will treat them as my own. I am good at cooking, making desserts and dumplings. I will create a good environment for your children to sleep well and eat well. I love this job from the bottom of my heart because being with children is the most delightful thing in the world. (Dou, 1996, p. 235)

Fang-liang's short speech relied on her experiences as a mother and her charity work in the Jiangxi Province. These comments created rapport with her audience. The symbolic mother role merged her private and public lives, and her words prompted the audience to acknowledge her nurturing, maternal characteristics, which appropriately extended to overseeing a public nursery. The most visible feature of Fang-liang's speech was its intense intimacy and use of personal experience, self-disclosure, and identification. Such characteristics reinforced a traditional nurturing persona and disassociated her from the confrontational or aggressive qualities expected of a foreigner. Fang-liang's career as the general director of the Armed Forces nursery school was short because her husband disapproved of her playing such a public role.

Fang-liang's behavior embodied the process required to gain respect as a Chinese woman. Her amazing transformation from her powerless and perilous situation was the realization of the ideals in Ban's *Lessons for Women*. As noted, in Lesson 4, ''Womanly Qualifications,'' Ban explicated the qualities of an ideal woman: *fude*, 婦德 (womanly virtue); (2) *fuyan*, 婦言 (womanly words); (3) *furong*, 婦容 (womanly bearing); and (4) *fugong*, 婦功 (womanly work). Fang-Liang's education enabled her to exercise the qualities of womanly virtue as a good wife and mother; her womanly bearing was reflected in her behavior; her womanly work was training her children and enhancing the standing of the Chiang family. Of special significance is that Fang-liang's speech was consistent with Ban's advice ''to choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language'' (Swann, 1932, p. 86). In order to adapt to the Chiang family, she mastered the Ningbo dialect and spoke to her four children only in Ningbo dialect; accordingly, none was able to converse with her in Russian. Fang-liang followed Ban's advice about how to avoid controversy and maintain harmony.

She responded to her husband's quick temper with silence and patience. Security staff reported that she seldom contested her husband's wishes verbally. According to Chou (1993), Fang-liang successfully resolved the crisis created by her husband's extramarital affair with Ms. Zhang with silence, a strategic choice to communicate her tolerance and her unending trust in her husband.

As First Lady, Fang-liang did not want to be addressed as "Madame Chiang," a title that belonged to "Madame Chiang Kai-shek." She preferred "Mrs. Chiang Ching-kuo," "President Chiang Ching-kuo's wife," or "Mrs. Fang-liang." According to traditional Chinese conventions, her mother-in-law took precedence over her, and she did not want to contravene that, even by title, an indication of knowing her place in the family (Chou, 1993).

Obeying her husband was Fang-liang's way of life even at the cost of sacrificing such personal pleasures as mahjong and golf.[17] Furthermore, she mirrored her husband by demonstrating friendliness to the general public. She dressed in ordinary clothing and walked with her children on the street, talking to people (Chou, 1993). However, she did not interfere in politics, nor did she involve herself in her husband's work. Fang-liang became uncomfortable when asked about politics. She would say, "We don't talk about politics at home. There are no public affairs at my home" (Chou, 1993, p. 200). When asked her opinion regarding public affairs, Fang-liang would respond, "I have to talk to my husband first. Whatever he says, I will then follow" (Chou, 1993, p. 317). As the wife of Chiang Ching-kuo, Fang-liang was renowned for her down-to-earth personality. While living in Xikou, Zhejiang Province, she was respected for her unpretentiousness, in contrast to other politicians' wives. After Fang-liang and her children arrived in Taiwan on April 24, 1949 and moved into the residence in Taipei, she did not hire many maids but handled most of the domestic work herself. Like an ordinary housewife, she could be observed doing the washing, sweeping the floors, and cleaning (Chou, 1993). In her prestigious role as First Lady, Fang-liang did not seek privileges. She did not ask anyone to arrange for her to visit Russia or require bodyguards to accompany her.

In the Taiwanese media, Fang-liang was depicted as a virtuous wife who never complained and adjusted to her quiet life. In addition, she rejected the title of the First Lady in an attempt to persuade the public that she was not different from the rest of the people (O'Neill, 2000). Her only request came in January 2004, when she asked the government to assist her in arranging for presidents Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo to be given a state burial and interred permanently on Taiwan, abandoning hope of burial on the Mainland.

Any public role for Chinese women has been difficult; Fang-liang faced even greater challenges. She was everything a Chinese woman was not. First Lady Fang-liang avoided a public role by withdrawing into the domestic domain and adopting the persona of a traditional Chinese woman, which contradicted her image as an athletic, outspoken, foreign Communist. During her husband's presidency, she was seen only on three kinds of special occasions: (1) at the airport either to see her husband off or to greet him on his return from overseas; (2) at official parties to welcome foreign visitors to Taiwan; and (3) at the ballot office during elections. Such

public appearances were those on which she enacted the role of a wife rather than that of First Lady.

When Fang-liang died in 2004, Taiwanese politicians expressed admiration for her character and her behavior. In a press release, former President Chen Shui-bian comments:

> Though she was born in Russia, she had the values of a traditional Chinese woman. She filled the role of a good wife and mother, placed her family first, helped her husband, and taught her children. She was a role model for women. (C. M. Wang, 2004)

Similarly, former Vice President Annette Lu describes the former First Lady as an "admirable woman," showing respect for "her tender and gentle characteristics and for her life-long commitment to her husband.. . . Her strength of will is worthy of the highest respect" (C. M. Wang, 2004). Chou (1993) writes of her transformation: "She was not only a Chinese woman, but she was more Chinese than other Chinese women. Despite her blond hair, blue eyes, white skin, and foreign figure, Fang-liang possessed a pure Chinese heart and embraced Chinese love" (p. 19). Chiang Fang-liang's ability to transform her personal disadvantages into honor and respect in the Chiang family illuminates how Chinese women have used familial agency to gain status.

Conclusion

Ban's *Lessons for Women* may appear to Western and contemporary Chinese readers to place unreasonable demands on women or to require a decorum that dooms women to inferiority. Nevertheless, a close reading suggests that Ban offered women of her time and those of later eras, whether Eastern or Western, whether obstinately traditional or emergently liberal, skills through which wives could gain status in their marital families. She described ways to gain strength through compliance and urged education so women could serve their families more effectively as mothers able to train their sons for greatness and their daughters to be good wives in harmonious homes. I have challenged the traditional interpretation that *Lessons for Women* silences and demeans women. I propose instead that it is a work devoted to Eastern ideas of communal, familial agency, in contrast to Western ideas of individual agency. Finally, I have used the transformation of Chiang Fang-liang to illustrate familial agency at work. The process by which she gained the respect of her marital family and of Taiwanese generally is an astonishing story. No one would have predicted that such a woman could gain the respect of a highly traditional imperial family. As an example, she reverses all of the usual Western ways to power and influence. In all things she was acquiescent, committed to silence and to womanly ways of being. As Ban wrote and Fang-liang exemplified, "To counteract firmness nothing equals compliance. Consequently, . . . the Way of respect and acquiescence is woman's most important principle of conduct" (Swann, 1932, p. 85).

This essay seeks to advance understanding of Chinese women's discourse by developing a traditional Chinese concept of agency that is collective rather than individual and in all ways linked to the family. Although previous scholars have interpreted *Lessons for Women* as limiting women's agency, Ban shows women how to gain

familial agency through a woman's compliance and her use of appropriate speech at propitious moments in order to obtain approval/status/honor/respect from the family and, in turn, the community. Familial agency, a form of collective, domestic agency, differs from individualistic, public or political agency as usually understood in the West. Familial agency, perhaps perversely, can transform submissiveness, obedience, and powerlessness into influence. Although one cannot know if First Lady Chiang's Fang-liang read *Lessons for Women*, she took the essence of these teachings to heart and led a life that manifested the ways in which what appeared to be powerlessness and silence became a rhetoric of survival.

In traditional Chinese culture, a woman's agency, as understood by Westerners, is a contradiction. As individuals, women have no agency; whatever power and influence may accrue to them is a result of their membership in, their relationships within, and their contributions to their marital families. Accordingly, a woman's agency in a Chinese cultural context must be understood in a dramatically different way. What to Western eyes would be a denial of agency—submission to one's in-laws, obedience to those above you in the familial hierarchy, behaving always in ways that show respect for one's husband and do honor to his family—are precisely the means through which a woman gains status and is able to affect family standing and, in turn, her status within it.

Notes

[1] There are inconsistencies in extant scholarship on the year when Ban was born. The earliest date given is around 45 CE. All Chinese names in this essay follow the convention that the surname is presented first, the given name second. I choose to use pinying system for Chinese names in this article except for well-accepted names like Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Fang-liang, and Mao Fu-mei, among others.

[2] *Sanchung* originates from the *Book of Rites*, suggesting that a woman obey a father or elder brother before marriage, a husband after marriage, and a son after entering widowhood. *Side* refers to Ban's womanly virtue, womanly words, womanly appearance, and womanly work.

[3] These were collective efforts; in the case of the early woman's movement, for example, votes at conventions reflected the extent of support by participants of a speech by an individual author or a committee, which was to be delivered to a state legislature or a congressional committee. No individual, however, was compelled to support views or positions with which she disagreed, and hierarchy in organizations or conventions reflected a woman's talent, experience, and available time.

[4] For Mulan and Liang, see Z. Wang (1999), pp. 127–128. For Xie, See Garrett (2002), p. 93. In the Chinese history, there are also renowned empresses and regents, such as Empress Wu and Express Cixi, who exerted influence through their maneuvering of power for personal and self-serving purposes.

[5] Jieyu, the most distinguished imperial concubine, was known for her wise refusal to ride in public with the emperor Cheng and her literary achievement in *Qiosan* or "The Autumn Fan," a classic Chinese poem and the symbol for the discarded wife (Gross & Bingham, 1973).

[6] *Dajia* was the official form of the modern *Dagu*. *Dagu*, an address of respect in family circles today, corresponds in usage to aunt. In China, children and adults alike would use this mode of address for an aunt. See Swann (1932), p. 52.

[7] This is another important historical work published not long before the time of the literary activities of the Ban family. See O'Hara (1971), pp. 230–235.
[8] For Ban's four *Fu*, see Swann (1932), pp. 102–105, 113–117.
[9] For Ban's memorial, "The Pacificator of Distant Countries," on behalf of her brother Chao, and her other memorial, "Yielding Place to Others," see Swann (1932), pp. 28, 31, 74–76.
[10] Swann (1932) writes that Ban observed "the canons of widowhood" (p. 40); the Chinese translation is *you jie xing fa du*, 有節行法度. This became a well-known phrase in the description of an ideal widow. Later writers credit it to this biography of Ban.
[11] *Hanzi* (standard Chinese script) is the official Chinese language that was created by men for use by men. Traditionally, most Chinese women were excluded from formal education in *Hanzi* writing or literature.
[12] For information, see Chen (1996), pp. 245–247 and Swann (1932), pp. 82–90.
[13] The most significant schools of thoughts in the Eastern Han include School of Confucius-Mancius, School of Lao-Zhuang, School of Mo Zi, School of Law, School of Names, School of Agriculture, School of Vertical and Horizontal, School of Storytellers, School of Naturalists, and Miscellaneous School.
[14] *Nüshu* is an allegedly 1,000-year-old female language articulated in a variety of texts sung and chanted by rural, illiterate women over their needlework on pieces of red fabric, handkerchiefs, and fans. For *Nüshu*, see L. Lee (2002) and L. Lee (2004).
[15] Many people in the Chinese and Japanese cultures adhere to the saying that "silence is gold, speech is silver" (Farrell, footnote 3, p. 24).
[16] Hebei is northeast of China. Chahar is historically part of Inner Mongolia. Parts of the former provinces of Rehe and Chahar were incorporated into Hebei in 1956.
[17] Allegedly, she took an official car to the golf course and was criticized by her husband, so Fang-liang decided to stop playing golf.

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