

THE VIRTUE OF YIN

Studies on Chinese Women

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Ban Zhao (c. 48-c. 120): Her Role in the Formulation of Controls Imposed Upon Women in Traditional China

The name of Ban Zhao or Cao *dagu* has been invoked for centuries as a model for young girls to emulate. Even modern scholars, both Chinese and Western, have lauded her achievements as historian, educator, writer and moralist. Despite the introduction of Western feminist thought to China at the turn of this century, Xie Wuliang, in his *Zhongguo funü wenxueshi*¹ (1917) does not comment on her important role in the formulation of the detailed rules by which women's thought and behaviour were controlled in traditional China. During the May Fourth period, one of the strongest anti-Confucian forces was directed at the eradication of inequalities between the sexes and the shattering of the many forms of control imposed on women, yet no organized criticism of Ban Zhao for her role in formulating such controls appears in that period. Though, in his *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* (1937), Chen Dongyuan gives a brief critique on Ban Zhao's views regarding women and puts her in the correct perspective,² and Tienchi Martin-Liao, in her more recent study (1984) on the education of Chinese women, points to a connection between Ban Zhao's elevated position at court and her Confucian outlook, and to her conservative stance on the question of equality between men and women,³ these views have yet to be fully substantiated.

In 1932, Nancy Lee Swann, whose study of Ban Zhao is perhaps still by far the most comprehensive and detailed to date, recognized her as the first thinker to formulate a single complete statement of feminine ethics,⁴ thus re-affirming her positive image in the history of Chinese women, rather than giving her a critical re-appraisal from a modern and progressive viewpoint. The following quotation may serve to show Swann's own outlook on the relationship between men and women:

The feminine virtues are immutable, and what is required by modern conditions is a restatement rather than a rejection of Pan Chao's instructions.⁵

It is obvious that she agrees with the basic tenets advocated by Ban Zhao: that man is superior to woman and obedience should be the guiding principle of a woman's behaviour throughout her life. It is the

¹ Xie Wuliang, *Zhongguo funü wenxueshi*, Section 2, pp. 18-28.

² Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi*, p. 47.

³ Tienchi Martin-Liao, *Frauenerziehung im Alten China, eine Analyse der Frauenbücher*, p. 50.

⁴ Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A.D.*, p. 133.

⁵ Swann, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

purpose of this paper to re-evaluate Ban Zhao's role in formulating standards which were used later to impose control over women.

Among Ban Zhao's works, *Nüjie* (Precepts for women) is the one that deals with this subject. She wrote it when she was more than fifty-four and had reached the zenith of her career.⁶ Her professed motive for writing it was to give guidance to "my girls" who were about to be married, so that they would know how to behave when they went into their husband's families. Assuming, for the moment, that that was her genuine motive, it is possible that she also intended it to be used by girls in general. In Chapter II of *Nüjie*, Ban Zhao advocates education for girls between the ages of eight and fifteen. Perhaps she had intended that *Nüjie* should act as a sort of primer for girls, thereby combining reading and moral education in the one textbook.

Nüjie was not the first work to aim at the moral edification of women.⁷ Liu Xiang wrote *Lienü zhuan* (Biography of eminent women) because he thought that the palace women of the Western Han came from lowly origins and, not having had proper education, were guilty of improper behaviour.⁸ The *Lienü zhuan* consists of the biographies of one hundred and twenty five women, arranged into categories ranging from "virtuous and wise" to "pernicious and depraved". Ban Zhao's work, however, is probably the more complete and systematic. It begins by stating the Confucian tenet that man is superior and woman is inferior and proceeds to counsel women to accept it as an underlying principle for behaviour and social relationships. Further, Ban Zhao provides specific instructions on a woman's personal conduct and the way in which a woman should behave in relationships with her husband and members of his family.

The entire text of *Nüjie* is found in Ban Zhao's biography in the *Hou Han shu*.⁹ As far as I know, there are three complete English translations—one in Swann's book,¹⁰ one in Florence Ayscough's *Chinese Women Yesterday and Today*,¹¹ and a third by van Gulik which appears in his *Sexual Life in Ancient China*.¹² A German translation is also available in Martin-Liao's book mentioned above.¹³

⁶ In her "Introduction" to *Nüjie* Ban Zhao stated that it was more than forty years since she had married into the Cao family at the age of fourteen.

⁷ Ban Zhao refers to another work entitled *Nü xian* (Rules for women) which was possibly also for the education of women. Swann claims that Liang Qichao and Gu Jiegang both told her that they thought it to be a long lost book. See Swann, *op. cit.*, p. 97, note 31.

⁸ *Han shu*, j. 36, p. 1957.

⁹ *Hou Han shu*, j. 84, p. 2786-92.

¹⁰ Swann, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-99.

¹¹ Florence Ayscough, *Chinese Women Yesterday and Today*, pp. 237-49.

¹² Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: a Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from 1500 B.C. to 1644 A.D.*

¹³ Martin-Liao, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-110.

Swann, and no doubt many others, was of the opinion that *Nüjie* is Ban Zhao's interpretation of classical teaching concerning women and the family, and that she merely inherits and expounds what was taught before her. However, close scrutiny of her precepts and comparisons with examples from Liu Xiang's *Lienü zhuan* and other sources where information can be found about the life of women before and during Ban Zhao's time, indicates that her demands are both more severe and more specific. In order to facilitate a comparative examination of the precepts, I have categorized the kinds of control advocated by Ban Zhao:

1. Control over ideology
2. Control over speech and behaviour
3. Control over divorce and remarriage
4. Control over women's ideology

Control Over Ideology

From the very beginning, Ban Zhao states the position of women in no uncertain terms. The first chapter has the heading: "Lowly and weak", which she says is the position of women and the reason why women are destined to serve others. Not only should a woman be humble and always defer to others, she must "endure insults and swallow smears, and constantly live as in fear".¹⁴ In the second chapter, it is maintained that a husband should learn to control his wife (the verb *yu*, meaning to control horses when driving a carriage, is used), and that a wife should learn to serve her husband. In the third chapter, it is stated that the behaviour of men and women should be different because *yin* (woman) and *yang* (man) have different natures: "*Yang*'s quality is hard and *yin*'s application is soft; men are valued for their strength while women are praised for their weakness." Clarifying this point Ban Zhao cites the aphorism: "Though a boy is born like a wolf, it is still feared that he may grow up to be like a worm, and yet though a girl is born like a mouse, it is still feared that she may grow up to be like a tiger." In short, a girl is not encouraged to be strong and independent, but is trained to be respectful and submissive from birth. However, a contrary view to the implications of these attitudes can be found by examining the theory of *yin* and *yang*, symbolizing man and woman, both in Daoist works and in the Confucian classic the *Iijing*, where *yin* and *yang* clearly represent two equal and mutually complementary opposites. The imbalance of the two is said to lead to problems. From this we might deduce that if *yin* were too weak, it would create an imbalance of the two and would therefore be inauspicious.

¹⁴ *Nüjie*, Chapter I, *Hou Han shu*, j. 84, p. 2787. (Hereafter, references to *Nüjie* will only give the chapter number and the page number in *Hou Han shu*.)

It is widely speculated that China went through a phase of matriarchal society before turning into the strongly patriarchal society described and perpetuated by the Confucianists. From the *Lienü zhuan* we learn that neither Qi, the originator of farming in China, nor Xie, Yao's minister in charge of education, had a father;¹⁵ their mothers had miraculously conceived them. Furthermore, they had inherited their respective special abilities, farming and education, from their mothers, Jiangyuan and Jiandi. Though more substantial evidence is yet to be found to prove the existence of such a matriarchal society, Guo Moruo's research on documentary evidence,¹⁶ and the discoveries at the archaeological site at Banpo near Xi'an have made some progress in that direction.¹⁷ Many pre-Qin writers alluded to an antiquity in which people knew their mothers, and not their fathers,¹⁸ and Western scholars have also contributed to this theory. For example, van Gulik has offered five reasons why he thinks that at some stage women were dominant in ancient Chinese society,¹⁹ and Frost has searched for clues from legends and characters to support the thesis of the existence of a Chinese matriarchal society.²⁰

Even after the transition to the patriarchal system, the position of women was still not as low as in later dynasties. Men often asked their women for advice, and if a man was in the wrong, his mother, his wife, or even his daughter could remonstrate with him. The *Lienü zhuan* contains ample illustrations of this kind in the first three chapters and many of these stories can be verified in the *Zuo zhuan*. The very first biography in *Lienü zhuan*, that of Ehuang and Nüying, shows that Shun, who later became one of the Sage Emperors exalted by Confucianists, consulted his two wives frequently on matters of importance. To cite a well-known example of a wife admonishing her husband: the wife of the coachman for the Chief Minister of Qi admonished her husband for being arrogant and complacent. She advised him to learn from his master Yan Ying, the Chief Minister. The coachman thanked his wife for correcting him and subsequently changed his ways. When Yan Ying found out, he gave the coachman's wife the

¹⁵ According to *Shiji*, Jiangyuan, Qi's mother, was Digu's first consort and Jiandi, Xie's mother, was his second consort. However, this was refuted by one of *Shiji*'s commentators, Jiao Zhou, for the reason that Digu and his alleged offspring were too far apart in time to be father and sons. (See the first paragraph of j. 3 and j. 4 of *Shiji* respectively.) Also in Digu's own biography in the same book (j. 1, p. 14), he was said to have married a daughter of Chen-feng and again a daughter of Juzi. No mention is made of his marriage to Jiangyuan and Jiandi.

¹⁶ Guo Moruo, *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu*, pp. 203-7.

¹⁷ Xi'an Banpo Bowuguan (comp.), *Zhongguo yuanshi shehui*.

¹⁸ *Zhuangzi*, j. 9, p. 19b.

¹⁹ van Gulik, pp. 5-8.

²⁰ Molly Spitzer Frost, "Chinese Matriarchy: Clues from Legends and Characters" (Ph. D thesis, Georgetown University, 1982).

honorary title *mingfu*. This story is also found in *Shiji* with only one omission—Yan Ying giving the honorary title to the coachman's wife.²¹ In this story neither the coachman, a commoner, nor Yan Ying, a high official, thought the wife's behaviour to be out of order.

When Liu Bang, the first emperor of Han, was in the process of building his empire, he constantly sought the advice of his wife. It is said in the *Shiji*, "Empress Lü was strong-willed and persevering by nature, she helped Gaozu (Liu Bang) to acquire the empire; the killing of the great ministers was mostly due to her efforts."²² (The killing of the great ministers here refers to Liu's eliminating possible competitors for the throne among his own ministers.) The relationship between husband and wife at this time was more like that of two equal partners than that of lord and servant as advocated by Ban Zhao. At a later date Empress Lü was to become the *de facto* ruler of the nation throughout her son's reign, after which she reigned for a further eight years as Dowager Empress until her death. After Empress Lü, seven other empresses reigned as dowagers during the Han dynasty.²³

In Ban Zhao's own time, Dowager Empress Deng ruled for fifteen years (106-121). Though Dowager Empress Deng is portrayed as the personification of humility in her own biography in the *Hou Han shu*, her scheming and autocratic ways can be seen from other biographies in the same work. She was able to rule because when her husband died, his elder son (by an unknown mother) was not made emperor. In his place the younger son, a sickly infant whom she had adopted, was put on the throne. When the infant emperor died eight months later, at the age of two, she again arranged for another minor be made emperor (Emperor An) so that she could continue to rule as Dowager Empress.²⁴ Even when Emperor An grew up, she was still unwilling to relinquish power, and eliminated any minister who dared to suggest that power be returned to the emperor.²⁵ During her rule she entrusted affairs of the state to her brother Deng Zhi, and she enfeoffed her brothers and nephews with large territories.²⁶ Ministers who did not support her and her clique were ruthlessly suppressed.²⁷ The Dowager Empress was Ban Zhao's pupil and she made Ban Zhao her most trusted adviser,²⁸ yet she could hardly be said to have been the exemplification of a self-effacing woman.

²¹ *Lienü zhuan*, j. 2, Biography 12; *Shiji*, j. 62, p. 2135.

²² *Shiji*, j. 9, p. 396.

²³ Dowager Empress Wang of Western Han and Dowager Dou, Deng, Yan, Liang, Dou and He of Eastern Han.

²⁴ *Hou Han shu*, j. 33, p. 1157; j. 55, p. 1803.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, j. 57, p. 1839.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, j. 16, pp. 612-17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, j. 45, p. 1524; j. 46, p. 1566; j. 60A, p. 1970.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, j. 84, pp. 2784-5.

Ban Zhao was held in great esteem by both Empress Deng and her husband, Emperor He. She was exalted to a height unmatched in the history of China by any woman (outside royalty). She completed the *Han shu* for her brother, Ban Gu, after his death. Because of the difficulty of the text, not many scholars could fully comprehend it. Ma Rong, who was to become one of the greatest Confucian scholars of the Eastern Han dynasty, studied it under her guidance while prostrated beneath her gallery. She did not exemplify the lowly woman she later advocated so strongly.

Despite her own success in literature, scholarship and politics, she did not encourage other women to follow her footsteps. From her success we must assume that she had received an excellent education in the classics, one that was comparable to that of her brother Gu. Yet, in the second chapter of *Nüjie*, she recommends that women only receive elementary education from the ages of eight to fifteen.²⁹ In Chapter 4, when she defines the four qualities of a woman, she again set very low standards for them:

Speaking of a woman's virtue, it is not necessary for her to be brilliant, outstanding or unique. As to a woman's speech, she need not be gifted at debate or be skilled with words. A woman's appearance need not be beautiful, and a woman's work need not be cleverer than others.³⁰

She does not encourage them to excel in any area, but counsels them to mediocrity.

Control Over Speech, Behaviour and Movement

On the topic of speech, Ban Zhao advises in Chapter 4: "Choose your words carefully, and utter not vile words. Speak only at the appropriate moment. Avoid offending others (with untactful words or loquacity)." Women are especially discouraged from being argumentative. In the previous section we saw that as a general rule she did not like women to be "gifted in debate and skilled with words". In Chapter 3, she argues that if the husband and wife become too intimate then arguments will occur. When arguments occur, the husband might become angry and beat his wife, thus the love between the couple will be affected and division will ensue. In Chapter 6, women are instructed to obey the mother-in-law regardless of whether the latter is right or wrong. She must not try to argue with the mother-in-law, but should be a shadow and an echo to her.³¹

The *Nüjie* does not state explicitly that women should not go out, perhaps because by this time such a rule had already been established. Ban Zhao goes much further: she spells out a series of interdictions for women:

²⁹ *Nüjie*, Chapter 2, p. 2788.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, p. 2789.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, p. 2791.

You should watch yourself so that you are always pure and quiet, and love not jesting and laughing.³²

Concentrate on weaving and spinning, and love not jesting and laughing.³³

Your ears should not listen to gossip in the street, your eyes should not dart sideway glances; going out you should not put on a seductive appearance, even at home you should not neglect your toilet. You should not gather together with your friends, nor peep out of doors and windows.³⁴

If these restrictions were followed to the letter, women would have had to forgo all interests, and enjoy neither relaxation nor entertainment of any kind. They would have been totally isolated from the world outside their own household. In an upper class family where the inner and outer compartments were separated, a woman's world would consist of only the inner compartment of the house. Not only could she not associate with the opposite sex outside her immediate family, but she was discouraged from taking part in gatherings of other women. Thus women in effect became prisoners with a life sentence. But did women really live like that? Evidence from earlier records and records of Ban Zhao's time seems to suggest otherwise.

I have not found references before this period which stipulate that women were not allowed to speak their minds, especially when they were wronged. Many examples of women expressing candid opinions are to be found both in the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Lienü zhuan*: Deng Man, the first consort of King Wu of Chu, gave her husband advice regarding two expeditions, and she told him frankly of his errors and inadequacies;³⁵ even a commoner such as the girl of the countryside of Chu dared to argue with an official from a neighbouring state when the latter wanted to whip her for accidentally breaking the axle of his carriage;³⁶ and the mother of Jiangyi, an official of Chu, reprimanded the King for wrongly punishing her son.³⁷ In fact the whole of Chapter 6 is devoted to such bold and outspoken women.

The interdiction on socializing between men and women did not seem to exist or to be enforced very strictly in pre-Qin times. In the *Shijing*, there are many examples of meetings of girls and boys. *Song* 93 seems to suggest that it was common practice for girls and boys to meet in large numbers outside the city and *Song* 95 describes boys and girls picking flowers and frolicking together on the river banks. From *Song*

³² *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, p. 2787.

³³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, p. 2789.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5, p. 2790.

³⁵ *Zuo zhuan*, Duke of Huan 13th year; *Lienü zhuan*, j. 3, Biography 2.

³⁶ *Lienü zhuan*, j. 6, Biography 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, j. 6, Biography 2.

贊大家



大家作女誠七篇有助內訓馬融善之今妻女習焉大家女妹曹皇后亦有才
惠為書以難之辭有可觀大家所著賦頌銘誄問注哀辭書論上疏遺令九十六
篇子婦丁氏為撰集之又作大家讚焉

A Qing Dynasty artist's portrait of Ban Zhao (i.e., Cao *dagu*). From *Wanxiaotang hua zhuan*.

76 we learn that men sometimes scaled walls to meet their lovers at night. The *Shijing* was said to have been compiled by Confucius, yet poems like these have survived without apparent censorship by the Great Sage. Possibly the moral climate of the period preceding him was comparatively liberal, and Confucius himself had a more tolerant attitude toward men and women meeting socially than is generally believed. In the *Lunyu* it is recorded that he visited the consort of Duke Ling of Wei, Nanzi, who was famous for both her beauty and her loose morals. Though Confucius denied having any improper motives, he did not deny the fact that the meeting actually took place.³⁸

In other works of the same period we can also find examples which suggest that women had more freedom of movement. Women of ordinary families were responsible for sharing the farmwork. Ehuang and Nüying, though daughters of King Yao, served Shun in the fields.³⁹ Admittedly, Shun existed in such an early age that information concerning him and his two wives is closer to legend than historical fact. However, Liu Xiang obviously did not consider this act improper, otherwise he would not have included it in the biography of these two exemplary women. Empress Lü also worked in the fields before Liu Bang rose against the Qin emperor.⁴⁰ Sericulture was a very important part of a woman's work, and it was necessary for women to go out to pick mulberry leaves in order to feed the silkworms. To save on the labour of carrying water to the house, women often washed clothes by the side of rivers or creeks. Such chores took women outside their homes and brought them into contact with strangers. We read of Empress Lü being approached by an old man for a drink of water.⁴¹ There are cases of women who meet men while they are picking mulberry leaves: in *Lienü zhuan*,⁴² as well as in an anonymous folk song among the *yuefu* dated around the Han dynasty.⁴³ We also find in *Lienü zhuan* the example in which Confucius sent Zigong to talk to a girl washing at Egu outside the city.⁴⁴ Upper class women were probably more restricted in their movements, yet they were not entirely confined to the palaces. In the *Lienü zhuan* we read that wives often accompanied their husbands on pleasure trips. Mengji, the first consort of Duke Xiao of Qi, accompanied her husband on a trip to Langye, while King Zhao of Chu took two of his concubines with him when

³⁸ *Lunyu*, j. 6, p. 5b.

³⁹ *Lienü zhuan*, j. 1, Biography 1.

⁴⁰ *Shiji*, j. 8, p. 346.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Lienü zhuan*, j. 6, Biography 6.

⁴³ "Moshang sang", in *Han-Wei yuefu feng jian*, published as *Gushi jishi deng sizhong*, j. 1, p. 10.

⁴⁴ *Lienü zhuan*, j. 6, Biography 6.

he made a pleasure trip;⁴⁵ on a later occasion the same concubines again accompanied him on an expedition to aid the State of Chen.

One of the most vivid descriptions of men and women socializing freely comes from Chunyu Kun's biography in the *Shiji*:

But if there is a feast of local residents (*lūlì zhī huì*) in which men and women are mixed in the seating, people take turns to drink leisurely while others gather a few friends together to gamble in *liubo* and *touhu*. On such occasions, holding hands is not punishable nor is staring prohibited.

Here and there one can see earrings and hairpins which have fallen off and been left behind. In my heart I love such occasions, hence I can drink eight piculs and only get twenty to thirty per cent drunk. At sunset when the drinkers have thinned out, we pool our bottles and sit around more closely together, a man and a woman would sit on the same seat, his shoes mixed up with hers. The cups and plates are left in disarray, while the candles in the hall go out, and the hostess asks me to stay behind after seeing all her guests off. The lapel of her silk blouse has come unfastened so that I can faintly smell her body fragrance. At this moment, my heart is at its happiest and I can drink ten piculs.⁴⁶

Chunyu Kun was a jester at the court of Duke Wei of Qi in the Warring States Period. The speech which is partially quoted above is meant to be in jest, so the condition described may be exaggerated. However, even after making the utmost allowance for this, the passage suggests a freer society than Ban Zhao's prescription as far as association between men and women is concerned.

Control Over Divorce and Remarriage

Following books on rites and propriety compiled in the Han dynasty, Ban Zhao stressed the rule that a man can remarry while a woman may never do so. In Chapter 5 of *Nüjie* she gives the following reason:

According to the books on propriety, there is justification for men to remarry, but there is no text upon which the remarriage of women can be based. Hence we say, the husband is like heaven; there is no way we can escape from heaven, similarly, women cannot leave their husbands.

Since under no circumstance can a woman leave her husband, then no matter what kind of a man he turns out to be, she must live with him and obey him. Her whole future depends on him, therefore it is imperative that she please him. Ban Zhao goes on in the same chapter to quote the *Nü xian*:

If you please one man, your whole life is made; if you lose the pleasure of one man, your whole life is finished.

⁴⁵ *Lienü zhuan*, j. 4, Biography 6 and j. 5, Biography 4, respectively.

⁴⁶ *Shiji*, j. 126, p. 3199.

Since a woman has to do anything to please her husband, Ban Zhao argues, it follows that she must be willing to do anything to please the husband's parents and brothers and sisters. Consequently she has to submit her own will to that of the whole family.

Scholars have already observed that remarriage of widows was not an uncommon phenomenon in ancient China. Based on records of the pre-Qin period, Liu Dehan concludes that during Eastern Zhou, apart from a few women who preferred not to, the majority of widows did remarry. In fact, often when the women themselves did not wish to remarry, their families or the authorities would coerce them into remarriage.⁴⁷ Liu also points out that not only could widows remarry but that women who had been divorced by their husbands also had the same right. Jack Dull collated various cases of women remarrying in the Han dynasty, and concludes that for both men and women, it was customary for them to remarry if their spouses had died or if they had been divorced.⁴⁸ Liu Xiang's *Lienü zhuan* is the first work we know of that has devoted a great deal of attention to the concept of chastity. Chaste women occupy two out of the seven chapters of his book. (The eighth chapter was a supplement appended to his work at a later time.) Yet O'Hara has found two cases in the *Lienü zhuan* in which a wife left, and another threatened to leave, her husband.⁴⁹ Dull also cites cases in the Han dynasty in which women left their husbands, as well as one case in which the wife's family initiated a divorce.⁵⁰ It seems that it was not particularly unusual for women to leave their husbands even though an official divorce had not been effected.

In view of the foregoing comparisons, it is clear that the standards recommended by Ban Zhao are far more stringent than those generally in practice prior to and during the Han dynasty. An explanation for this may be found by an investigation of the trend of Han thought and its influence on social attitudes in Eastern Han.

From "Rulin zhuan", the chapter on Confucian scholarship in all three of the official histories covering the Han dynasty, i.e. *Shiji*, *Han shu* and *Hou Han shu*, we can see that in the beginning of Western Han, Daoist influence was prominent. Despite the fact that in the reign of Emperor Wu Confucianism was held as orthodox, and the state ceased to recognize all other schools of thought, the succeeding monarchs again turned to Daoism. However, after the establishment of the Eastern Han dynasty, all the emperors from Emperor Guangwu to Emperor He held Confucianism in high esteem and took a personal interest in its teaching and propagation. At the same time, a conservative trend started to gradually grow in reaction to the fairly

⁴⁷ Liu Dehan, *Dong Zhou funü shenghuo*, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁸ Jack Dull, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-7.

⁴⁹ Albert Richard O'Hara, *The Position of Women in Early China According to the Lieh Nü Chuan*, "The Biographies of Chinese Women", p. 277.

⁵⁰ Dull, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2.

relaxed social control in Western Han, a fact which Eastern Han scholars saw as the cause of moral degeneration from the high standards of the ancients. The palace women of the Western Han emperors are renowned for their lowly origins and low moral calibre. Liu Xiang is said to have compiled his *Lienü zhuan* because:

He saw that the customs of the time were getting more extravagant and immoral. (Empress) Zhao (Feiyan) and (Empress) Wei (Zifu) rose from lowly and unworthy families and exceeded the bounds of propriety. Xiang was of the opinion that the teaching of the ruler should come from within his family and extend outwards, beginning from those closest to him. So he selected from the *Songs* and the *Documents* wise consorts and chaste women who had made a country prosper or a family famous, as well as those who were pernicious and depraved, and had caused the disorder or the ruin of a country or a family. He then organized their lives into the *Lienü zhuan* in eight volumes so as to admonish the emperor.⁵¹

The Ban family had a lot in common with the Liu family. Both produced great scholars who at some stage of their career were appointed to the Imperial Library as editors. In fact, Ban Zhao's great uncle Ban You had worked with Liu Xiang in the Imperial Library.⁵² In both families, the father had started an important writing project which was completed by his son. Most important of all, both were Confucian in their basic philosophy. Dull notes that many Han scholars felt that the pre-Qin rites had been lost during the Qin dynasty and the ensuing upheavals, and that while the Han dynasty had muddled through thus far without proper rites, there was a need to formulate a set of comprehensive rites. He goes on to list the efforts made by scholars in Eastern Han, amongst them Ban Zhao and her brother Gu, to address this problem.⁵³ His view that Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* is not a description of common practice but rather a list of prescriptive norms for the conduct of a woman's life is definitely closer to the truth.

Ban Zhao's precepts are detailed and practical, and cover virtually every aspect of a woman's life; the controls imposed were therefore equally comprehensive. Like other Confucian thinkers of her time, Ban Zhao wanted to restrain people's behaviour with propriety. In this may lie Ban Zhao's real motive for writing the *Nüjie*. Her professed motive—that she wrote it for the guidance of "my girls"—may have been nothing but a pretext. I am basing this hypothesis on two arguments. Firstly, as pointed out above, she was fifty-four or more when she wrote *Nüjie*. Her biography tells us that she was married at the age of fourteen and that she was widowed at a young age. From the combination of these factors it is reasonable to assume that at the time she wrote the work her children would have been in the age group of thirty to forty, and therefore well past the marrying age. It is, of

⁵¹ *Han shu*, j. 36, p. 1957.

⁵² *Ibid.*, j. 100A, p. 4202.

⁵³ Dull, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-8.

course, possible that "my girls" refers to her granddaughters, but this does not seem likely from the context. Secondly, at this stage of her life, Ban Zhao was a well respected public figure who could count even the Dowager Empress among her pupils. She could not have written *Nüjie* without at least being aware of the influence it might have on the education of girls in general. Therefore I believe she wrote it with the intention of establishing a standard for women of all ages. It was her contribution to the Han Confucian movement which aimed at bringing about a more orderly society based on Confucian propriety. However, the mould she created was so constraining that the individual who tried to conform risked suffocation. The woman would end up with no personality of her own, as she would not be able to think her own thoughts, speak her own mind or do as she chose. All her life she would be trying to please her husband, his parents and brothers and sisters. If, in the unfortunate event that she failed to do so, the consequences would be absolutely tragic, because that would mean the end of her happiness for the rest of her life.

According to her biography, the reaction to *Nüjie* in Ban Zhao's own lifetime was mixed. Her own sister-in-law was critical and wrote a letter to debate her views. On the other hand, her pupil Ma Rong thought it was good and asked his wife and daughters to study it. The biographies of Ma Rong's two daughters are to be found in the same chapter as Ban Zhao's biography in *Hou Han shu*. They do not appear to have been brought up according to Ban Zhao's precepts. Lun, the elder, is portrayed as gifted in debating. On two occasions she had argued with her husband, something against which Ban Zhao had specifically remonstrated. The younger daughter, Zhi, is said to have composed a poetic essay entitled "Shenqing fu" (Poetic essay to express one's feelings), so she must have received more than the elementary education recommended by Ban Zhao.

Following Ban Zhao's era, China fell into a long period of relaxed morals when comparatively little attention was given to her *Nüjie*. It was not until Neo-Confucianism had made its mark on Chinese thought that Emperor Shen of the Ming dynasty ordered his minister Wang Xiang to prepare notes for the *Nüjie* and published it together with Empress Xu's *Neixun* in 1580. Later, together with two more works, *Nü Lunyu* by Song Ruozhao (Tang dynasty) and Madam Liu's *Nüfan jielu* (Ming dynasty), they were republished as the *Four Books for Women*. From then onward, Ban Zhao's work gained wide circulation, for just as every literate man started his education with the *Four Books*, every literate woman began hers with the *Four Books for Women*. This situation continued until modern education modelled on the West supplanted traditional education. Hence Ban Zhao's influence on the life of women from late-Ming to at least the fall of Qing cannot be over-emphasized. More and more women were expected to conform to the idealistic pattern delineated by Ban Zhao and others. As a result,

lifelong celibacy of young widows and persecution of remarried women robbed many women of a happy domestic life. Worse still, young girls were made to marry a rooster when their betrothed died and widows were even encouraged to commit suicide on the death of their husbands. Ban Zhao did not intend, nor could she foresee, that centuries later her precepts would start a trend which would develop and snowball into the “man-eating rites and teachings” against which the May Fourth generation would vehemently rebel.