

# Confucian Legacies and the Persistence of Gender Norms in Republican China

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## Motivation

- ▶ How do **traditional cultural norms** shape women's roles during periods of **social and political transition**?
    - ▶ Periods of transition introduce **new ideologies** that often **clash with existing norms**

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    - ▶ Periods of transition introduce **new ideologies** that often **clash with existing norms**
  - ▶ **Republican China (1911–1949)** provides a unique setting:
    - ▶ Western ideas of women's emancipation expanded rapidly
    - ▶ Deeply entrenched **Confucian moral institutions** remained locally embedded

# This Paper

## Research Question

Whether the **Confucian gender values** constrained women's emancipation and their participation in the public sphere?

- ▶ **Tertiary education enrollment** – Access to Western-style institutions
- ▶ **Participation in the nascent communist movement** – Political mobilisation
- ▶ **Women's role as social elites** – Visibility in influential public roles

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## Approach

- ▶ Build a **county-level** measurement of Confucian gender norms using “chaste women” records
- ▶ Employ an **IV strategy** based on the shortest distance to Ban Zhao- the most influential female Confucian sage

# Preview of Findings

- ▶ **Areas with stronger Confucian influence show:**
  - ▶ Lower female participation in university education
  - ▶ Greater female involvement in revolutionary politics
  - ▶ Selective emergence of women in socially prominent roles
- ▶ These patterns suggest a **shift in women's pathways into public life**:
  - ▶ From Western-style education
  - ▶ Toward morally framed, collective, and political engagement

## Historical Context

## Why Republican China (1911–1949)

## Republican China combines:

- ▶ **Institutional rupture** (end of empire, new education system)
    - ▶ Xinhai Revolution (1911)
    - ▶ May Fourth Movement (1919)
  - ▶ **Ideological conflict** (Confucian morality vs. Western liberal ideas)
    - ▶ Western Ideology: democracy, science and women's liberation
    - ▶ Confucian Values: Hierarchy, Filial Piety and Patriarchal Domination

## Historical Context

Confucian Gender Norms and Female Sages



Chaste Women

- ▶ **Posthumously honoured** women who remained chaste after widowhood or who died defending their sexual virtue, honoured by local authorities.(Rosenlee, 2006) ▶ Example

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- Female are located within the *nei* (*inside*) sphere of the household while men occupied with *wai* (*outside*) sphere of education and public life. (Rosenlee, 2006)

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### Female Confucian Sages – Ban Zhao (AD 49 - AD 120)

- ▶ Author of “Lessons for Women”: widely adopted as the standard text for women’s education and moral training.

## Data: Measuring Confucian Gender Norms

## Chaste Women Records

- ▶ Measure the intensity of Confucian gender norms by the number of chaste women at the **county-level**

## Data: Measuring Confucian Gender Norms

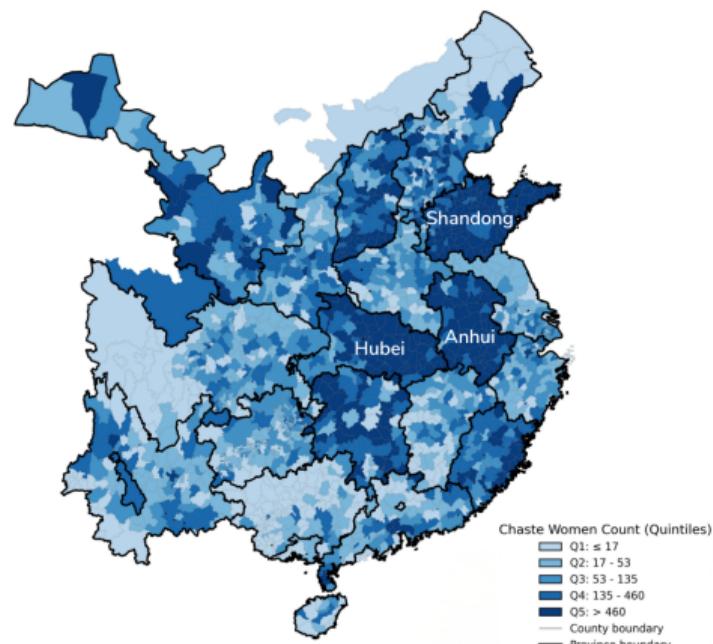
Chaste Women Records

- ▶ Measure the intensity of Confucian gender norms by the number of chaste women at the **county-level**
  - ▶ **Source:** Provincial level *Tongzhi* (local gazetteers)
    - ▶ Cumulative counts from the **Qing dynasty** (AD 1644-1911) within China Proper

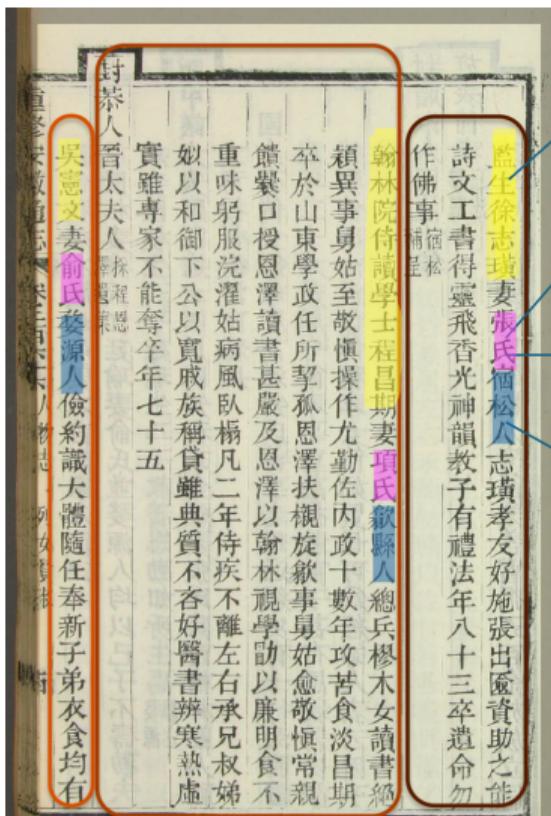
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    - ▶ Cumulative counts from the **Qing dynasty** (AD 1644-1911) within China Proper
  - ▶ Digitised and extracted via deep-learning Optical Character Recognition(**OCR**) methods.



## OCR and Data Construction



Husband's  
Name and  
Title

## Chaste Woman's Last Name

Identifying  
Anchor: “民”

**County of  
Origin**

- A **local gazetteer** (地方志) is a historical reference book compiled by local officials or scholars that documents the **geography, history, society, and culture** of a specific region.
  - Records information such as population, economy, local customs, notable people, education, natural resources, disasters, and administrative changes.

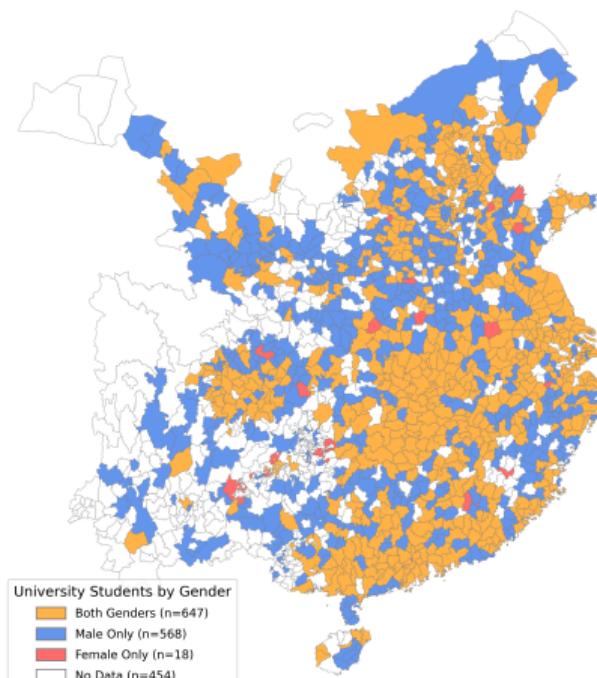
Page 30 in Anhui Tongzhi,  
published in Guangxu Era  
Qing dynasty (1881)

## Data: Female Emancipation Outcome Variables

Tertiary Education Attendance

- ▶ Share of Female Students in Tertiary Education

- ▶ Over 30,000 university graduates (1920–1947)
  - ▶ Include their name, gender, and place of origin
  - ▶ Students from more than 53 universities
  - ▶ *Source: the Collection of Historical Materials on Colleges in the Republic of China*

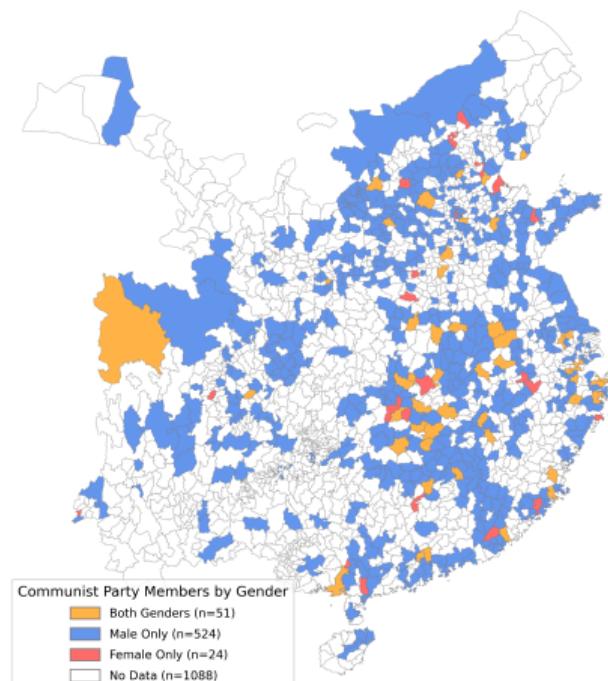


## Data: Female Emancipation Outcome Variables

Female Communist Leaders

## Dummy Variable of Female Communist Leader

- ▶ Collected over 1,500 biographies of Communist leaders (Mao's Era)
  - ▶ They took leading roles in the CCP organisation
  - ▶ Name, place of origin and positions

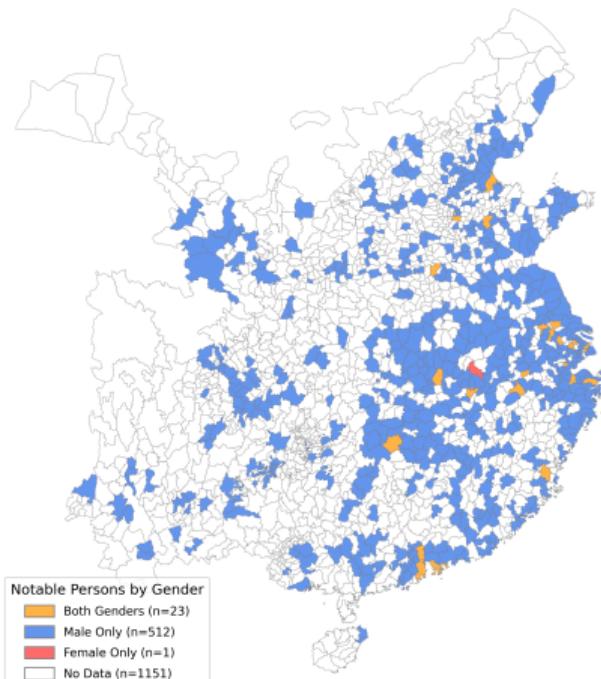


## Data: Female Emancipation Outcome Variables

## Female Notables

## Dummy Variable on Notable Women

- ▶ Collected over 3,000 biographies of notable persons in Republican China
  - ▶ Social elites in Arts, Business, Politics and professionals
  - ▶ Name, place of origin and detailed positions



## 2SLS Estimation

## OLS Equation:

$$Y_i = \beta \log Chaste_i + \gamma X'_i + \delta_p + \theta_l + \lambda_r + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

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2SLS:

## First Stage:

$$\log Chaste_i = \pi_1 \ln(Dist\_Pan\_Zhao)_i + \gamma X'_i + \delta_p + \theta_l + \lambda_r + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

### Second Stage:

$$Y_i = \beta \log \widehat{Chaste}_i + \gamma X'_i + \delta_p + \theta_l + \lambda_r + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

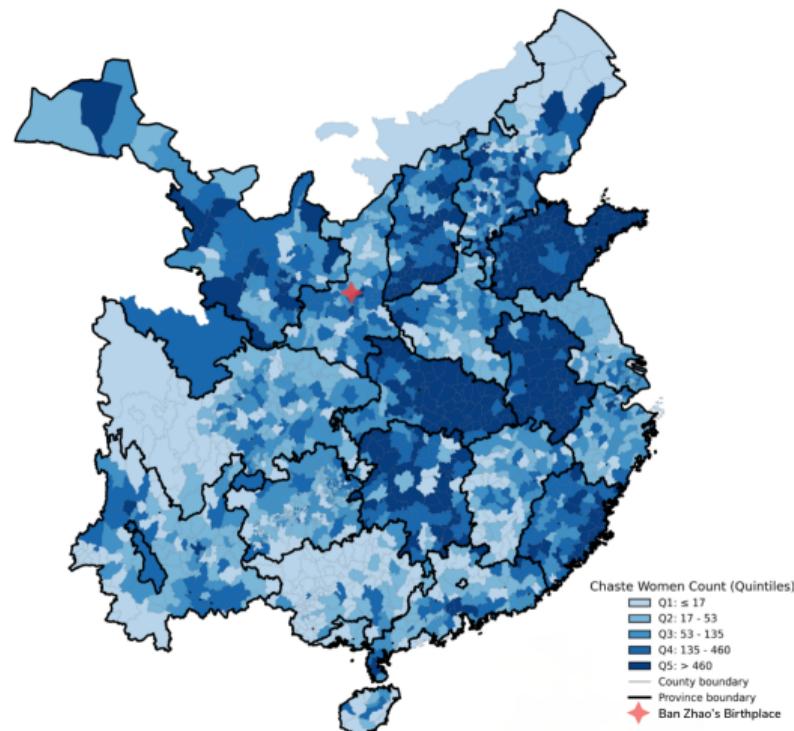
- ▶  $\gamma X'_i$  are exogenous controls: geographic, socio-economic and cultural institutions
  - ▶ Fixed-effects:  $\delta_p$  Province(18),  $\theta_l$  Language-region(14), and  $\lambda_r$  Macro-region(10)
  - ▶ Cluster standard errors at the **prefecture** and **language group** level

# Instrumental Variable

Distance to the birthplace of the female Confucian sage **Ban Zhao** as an IV

- ▶ **Relevance:** Spatial diffusion
  - ▶ Counties closer to her birthplace are more likely to honour chaste women
  - ▶ Chaste-woman recognition varies systematically with distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace in earlier dynasties.

▶ Go



## Exclusion Restriction

### Balance tests: Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace (Panel A)

Table: Balance tests: Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace and geographic, political, and institutional characteristics

Panel A	County-level					Prefecture-level				
	Pop. den	Jinshi			1580	1630	1680	1776	1820	1851
		1910	Ming–Qing	Song–Qing						
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<b>Distance to Ban Zhao</b>	-0.344 (0.211)	0.344 (0.306)	-0.203 (0.189)	0.011 (0.014)	0.009 (0.018)	0.010 (0.012)	-0.005 (0.024)	-0.010 (0.028)	-0.014 (0.036)	
Geo Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Full controls	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	
<i>N</i>	1154	1686	1686	248	248	248	248	248	248	

**Notes:** Cols. (1)–(3) are county-level, include macro-region, province, and language-group fixed effects; standard errors are clustered at the prefecture-language group level. Cols. (4)–(10) are prefecture-level with robust standard errors. All regressions include geographic controls (ruggedness, elevation, agricultural suitability, and river/coast dummy variables). Full controls include prefectoral capital and treaty port dummies, presence of universities and missions, urbanisation (1910), (log) *keju* holders (Ming–Qing), population density (1910), Confucian/Buddhist temples, and government/Protestant primary school enrolments. Significance: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

### Balance tests: Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace (Panel B)

**Table:** Balance tests: Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace and geographic, political, and institutional characteristics

Panel B	Prefecture-level									
	Pop. den			Urban rank		Telegraph		Commerc.	Firms	Chaste
	1880	1910	1920	1910	1896	1881–1936	1913	1896	Qing	
	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	
<b>Distance to Ban Zhao</b>	-0.032 (0.045)	-0.048 (0.057)	-0.045 (0.038)	-0.677 (0.696)	0.082 (0.125)	-0.009 (0.174)	0.062 (0.107)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.808*** (0.281)	
Geo Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Full controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
<i>N</i>	248	248	245	260	260	260	260	260	265	

**Notes:** Prefecture-level regressions estimated with robust standard errors. All regressions include geographic controls and the full set of controls described in Panel A.

Significance: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

Main results: Confucian norms and female outcomes

Table: Effect of Chaste Count (log) on Gendered Outcomes

Outcome	OLS	2SLS	First-stage F	N
Female university student shares	0.000 (0.002)	-0.019** (0.007)	21.0	1233

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► Table

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Female Communist dummy	0.000 (0.002)	0.015** (0.006)	37.6	1686
Female Notable dummy	0.001 (0.001)	0.003* (0.002)	37.6	1686

All specifications include province, language-group, and macro-region fixed effects, geographic controls, and the full set of controls. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Mechanisms: Confucian norms and pathways into public life

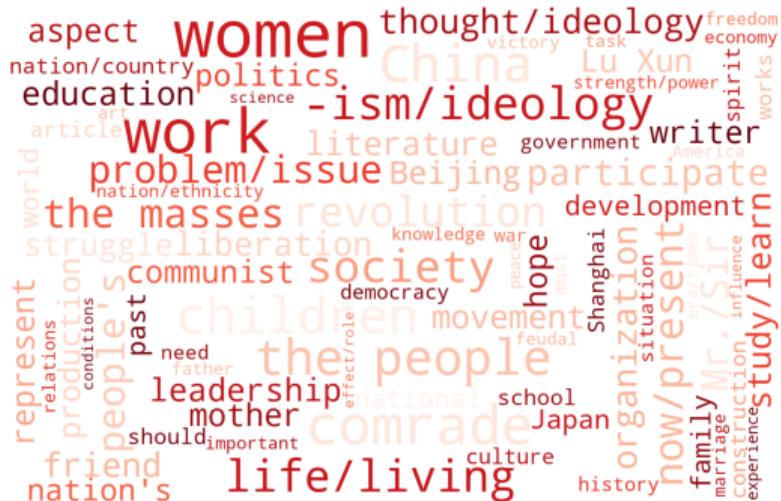
- ▶ **Reallocation of female public participation channels**
    - ▶ Confucian norms **constrained** women's access to elite education.
    - ▶ But reshaped how women could enter public life.
  - ▶ **Moral framing of early Communist mobilisation**
    - ▶ Revolutionary participation framed as duty, sacrifice, and collective morality.

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  - ▶ **Moral framing of early Communist mobilisation**
    - ▶ Revolutionary participation framed as duty, sacrifice, and collective morality.
  - ▶ **Text evidence from women's writings**
    - ▶ Preliminary text analysis of books, pamphlets, and essays by female activists (both Communists and Notables).
    - ▶ Strongly progressive discourse for both groups: **gender equality, economic independence, critique of Confucian norms.**
    - ▶ Suggests revolutionary politics as an ideologically transformative pathway for women.

# Word Cloud of the Text Analysis

Communist Women's Texts - Key Themes (English)



Notable Women's Texts - Key Themes (English)



# Conclusion and next steps

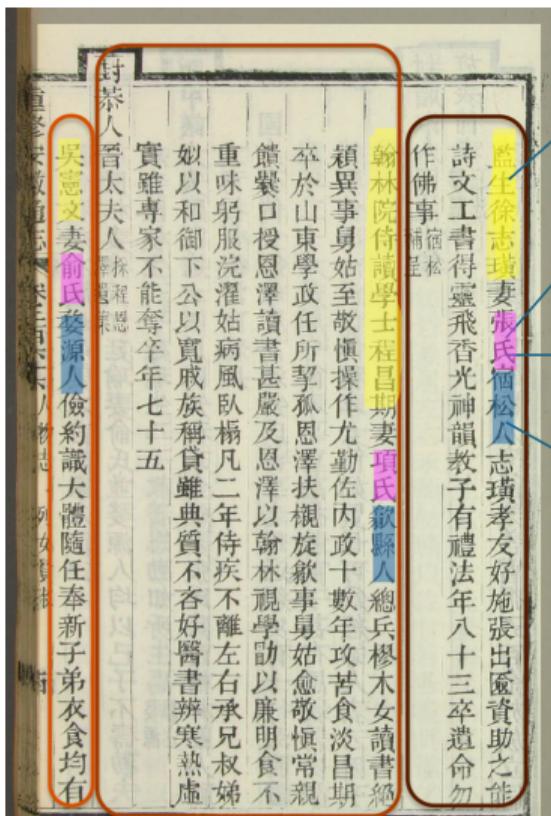
- ▶ Confucian gender norms lead to mixed outcomes on women's pathways into public life
  - ▶ Away from elite education
  - ▶ Toward collective, morally framed participation
- ▶ Next steps
  - ▶ Text analysis: Female vs. Male narratives
  - ▶ Heterogeneity analysis by Confucian legacy and CCP penetration
- ▶ Suggestions are welcome!
  - ▶ ruikunm@student.unimelb.edu.au



Appendix -Deep Learning Powered OCR

- ▶ Modern OCR systems are powered by **deep learning**, especially **Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)** and sometimes **Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs)** or **Transformers**.
  - ▶ The Pipeline (Simplified)
    - ▶ **Image preprocessing**— denoising, binarisation, and resizing.
    - ▶ **Feature extraction**— CNN layers detect strokes, curves, and shapes.
    - ▶ **Sequence modelling**— RNNs/Transformers capture character order and context in a line of text.
    - ▶ **Decoding**— The network outputs text sequences (e.g., with a CTC loss function that aligns predictions to ground truth).

# OCR and Data Construction



Husband's Name and Title

Chaste Woman's Last Name

Identifying Anchor: “氏”

County of Origin

- A **local gazetteer** (地方志) is a historical reference book compiled by local officials or scholars that documents the **geography, history, society, and culture** of a specific region.
- Records information such as population, economy, local customs, notable people, education, natural resources, disasters, and administrative changes.

Page 30 in Anhui Tongzhi,  
published in Guangxu Era  
Qing dynasty (1881)

## OCR and Data Construction

監生徐志璜妻張氏宿松人志璜孝友好施張出資助之能

詩文工書得靈飛香光神韻教子有禮法年八十三卒遺命勿

翰林院侍讀學士程昌期妻項氏歙縣人總兵彬木女讀書經

異事屢始至敬慎操作龍勤佐內政十數年攻苦食淡昌期

卒於山東學政任所，孤恩澤扶概旋歿事，舅姑愈敬慎常親

饋累口授恩澤讀書甚嚴及恩澤以翰林視學勸以廉明食不

重味躬服浣濯姑病風臥榻凡二年侍疾不離左右承兄叔妣

以和御下公以實戚族稱貸雖典質不容好医書辨寒热虛

實雖專家不能奪卒年七十五

封恭人晋大夫

标程因漂遗集

**吳畫文妻俞氏**整源人，偷約識大體，隨任秦新子弟衣食均有

Chaste ID	1	2	3
Chaste Surname	张氏	项氏	俞氏
Character	贤淑	贤淑	贤淑
Husband Surname	徐	程	吴
Husband Title	监生	翰林院侍读学士	N/A
County Of Origin	宿松县	歙县	婺源县
Prefecture	徽州府	徽州府	徽州府
Province	安徽省	安徽省	安徽省

## OCR and Data Construction

庠生霍若祺妻方氏年二十四若祺卒遺子蒙孫毀形戴義晉死靡他雖身出宦門日事紡績織衣蔬食三十餘年不問戶外事蒙孫甚憇乙卯登監書官知州孫師乾亦領崇正分百鄉薦皆方式器所貽也天啟二年有司題卒年八十五廣州烈傳贈承德郎謝之屏妻何氏貞靜端重治家有法年十八歸之屏十載而之屏卒何毀極茹苦矢志始舟足不踰闈者四十年訓孤養幼登已未進士有司題請坊表累贈安人同上

何妙慈錫有女賦性端肅少即持齋蔬食受聘陸家未歸而陸歿妙慈年十六嚙指自誓不改嫁母不能奪孀居四十年節操彌厲分守道王憲其門志

龐秉綱妻勞氏年二十一生一子秉綱亡毀容益節家貧僑指以度無怨也鄰婦諷之再字勞到是時嘯指曰未亡人不卽從夫地下以衛孤耳遂杜門不與鄰婦絕水操凜凜子長受室亦早逝暨媳洗沂焚熒婦守撫孤成立年七十有一有司旌表之之

岑氏二烈女一名蟬姐刺史昌運季女二名二姪文學廷器次女俱年十六性孝淑被冠園樓焚燭

Figure: Excerpt from the Original Zhejiang Tongzhi

Source: This data comes from Xu (2004)

## Summary Statistics

Table: Summary Statistics on Main Outcome and Independent Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Ln(Chaste Women)	1686	3.587	3.827	-6.908	8.895
Chaste Women (Count)	1686	356.585	728.886	0	7297
Number Female students	1233	2.528	12.065	0	297
Number Male students	1233	15.399	83.633	0	2990
Female Student Share	1233	0.114	0.170	0	1
Total Communist Leader	1686	0.839	1.828	0	19
Female Communist Share (Dummy)	1686	0.045	0.208	0	1
Female Notable Share (Dummy)	1686	0.014218	0.1184237	0	1
Ln(Dist <sub>Panzhao</sub> )	1686	6.603	0.625	1.981	7.467

*Note: This table provides summary statistics for key variables used in the regressions. The number of observations, mean, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values are reported for these variables. The full sample comprises 1686 counties in China Proper by 1911. Of the 1686 counties, we have female student data for only 1233.*

## Summary Statistics

Table: Summary Statistics on Control Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Elevation	1686	599.397	685.531	0.466	4510.960
Terrain Ruggedness Index	1686	141.617	126.638	1.103	856.009
Caloric Index (.000)	1686	121.803	28.339	0	181.284
Population Density	1686	9670	388945	0.226	15970668
University (Dummy)	1686	0.013	0.113	0	1
Number of Jinshi	1686	1.247	2.364	0	9
Prefectural government (Dummy)	1686	0.105	0.306	0	1
Treaty ports(Dummy)	1686	0.121	0.327	0	1
Urban	1686	0.068	0.352	0	3
Density of Catholic Missionary	1686	0.428	1.066	0	14.639
Protestantism Presence (Dummy)	1686	0.533	0.499	0	1
Distance to Coast(Km)	1686	152.044	117.919	8.004	656.387
Distance to Provincial Capital(Km)	1686	262.111	236.524	2.165	1672.147
Distance to River(Km)	1686	465.735	359.911	0.602	2010.574
Confucius Temple	1686	0.075	0.280	0	2
Buddhist Temple	1686	1.402	2.872	0	55
Govnt School Enrollment	1156	126.294	144.886	0	2414.131
Protest School Enrollment	1156	3.905	9.540	0	180.343
Railway (Dummy)	1156	0.345	0.476	0	1
Modern Firms	1156	0.385	2.761	0	77
Distance Boxer Uprising	1156	3.936	0.989	0	5.766

Note: This table provides summary statistics for key control variables used in the regressions. The number of observations, mean, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values are reported for these variables. The full sample consists of 1686 counties within the China Proper Area by 1911. Among the total of 1686 counties, we only have female student data in 1233 counties.

# Alternative Measurement – Dummy Measure of Chaste

Table: Effect of Chaste Count (Dummy) on Gendered Outcomes (Counts)

Outcome Variable	OLS	2SLS	First-stage F	N
Female University Student Share	-0.004 (0.017)	-0.277* (0.145)	8.79	1233
Female Communist Dummy	0.008 (0.013)	0.197** (0.079)	22.73	1686
Female Notable Dummy	0.010 (0.006)	0.043 (0.040)	22.73	1686

All specifications include province, language-group, and macro-region fixed effects, geographic controls, and the full set of controls. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

## Balance Test

▶ Back

**Table:** Balance tests: Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace and geographic, political, and institutional characteristics

**Notes:** Regressions in Cols. (1)-(3) are at the county-level, include macro-region, province and language-group fixed effects and cluster the standard errors at the prefecture-language group level. Regressions in Cols. (4)-(19) are at the prefecture level and are estimated with robust standard errors. All regressions include geographic controls: ruggedness index, mean elevation, agricultural suitability, a set of dummy for access to river and to the coast; and, except when the outcomes are pre-19th century, they include the full set of controls: dummy variables for prefectoral capitals, treaty ports, the presence of universities, of Catholic and Protestant missions; a measure of urbanization in 1910; the (log) number of *keju* holders in the Ming-Qing dynasty; and its derivative in 1810; the number of Confucian and Buddhist temples; and, the number of

# 2SLS Results

Table: Effect of Chaste Women on Female University Enrolment

	OLS (1)	IV (2)	OLS (3)	IV (4)	OLS (5)	IV (6)
Chaste (log)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.047*** (0.011)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.029*** (0.007)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.019** (0.007)
<b>First stage</b>						
Distance to Pan Zhao		-0.475*** (0.136)		-0.512*** (0.136)		-0.528*** (0.136)
F stat		26.87		35.72		21.02
Obs.	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233
Geo controls	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Full controls	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Prov./Lang./Region FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

**Notes:** The dependent variable is the share of female university students. The endogenous variable is the log number of chaste women, instrumented by the (log) distance to Pan Zhao's birthplace. Standard errors are two-way clustered at the prefecture and language-group levels.

# 2SLS Results

**Table:** Effect of Chaste Women on Female Communist Participation

	OLS (1)	IV (2)	OLS (3)	IV (4)	OLS (5)	IV (6)
Chaste (log)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.009)	0.001 (0.002)	0.017** (0.007)	-0.000 (0.002)	0.015** (0.006)
<b>First stage</b>						
Distance to Pan Zhao		-1.093*** (0.192)		-1.291*** (0.192)		-1.154*** (0.192)
F stat		47.01		50.11		37.59
Obs.	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686
Geo controls	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Full controls	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Prov./Lang./Region FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

**Notes:** The dependent variable is a dummy equal to one if a county produced at least one female Communist participant. The endogenous variable is the log number of chaste women, instrumented by the (log) distance to Pan Zhao's birthplace. Standard errors are two-way clustered at the prefecture and language-group levels.

# 2SLS Results

Table: Effect of Chaste Women on the Presence of Notable Women

	OLS (1)	IV (2)	OLS (3)	IV (4)	OLS (5)	IV (6)
Chaste (log)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.005* (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003 (0.003)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003* (0.002)
F stat		47.01		50.11		37.59
Obs.	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686
Geo controls	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Full controls	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Prov./Lang./Region FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

**Notes:** The dependent variable is a dummy equal to one if a county produced at least one notable woman. The endogenous variable is the log number of chaste women, instrumented by the (log) distance to Pan Zhao's birthplace. Standard errors are two-way clustered at the prefecture and language-group levels.

## Alternative Measures – Other Dynasties

Table: Distance to Ban Zhao's Birthplace and the Historical Diffusion of Chastity Norms

**Notes:** All regressions include macro-region, province and language-group fixed effects and cluster the standard errors at the prefecture-language group level. All regressions include geographic controls: ruggedness index, mean elevation, agricultural suitability, a set of dummy for access to river and to the coast; and the full set of controls: dummy variables for prefectoral capitals, treaty ports, the presence of universities, of Catholic and Protestant missions; a measure of urbanization in 1910; the (log) number of *keju* holders in the Ming-Qing dynasty; population density in 1910; the number of Confucian and Buddhist temples; and government and Protestant primary school enrolments. Distance to Ban Zhao's birthplace is the main independent variable. Statistical significance: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

## Alternative Measures – Chaste Dummy

Table: Effect of Chaste Dummy on Gendered Outcomes

	OLS (1)	IV (2)	OLS (3)	IV (4)	OLS (5)	IV (6)
<b>Panel A: Female University Students Share</b>						
Chaste dummy	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.665** (0.246)	-0.000 (0.014)	-0.417** (0.151)	-0.004 (0.017)	-0.277** (0.145)
F stat		10.98		11.83		8.79
Obs.	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233
<b>Panel B: Female Communist Dummy</b>						
Chaste dummy	0.019 (0.014)	0.033 (0.116)	0.015 (0.016)	0.224** (0.088)	0.008 (0.013)	0.197** (0.079)
F stat		21		28.26		22.73
Obs	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686
<b>Panel C: Female Notable Dummy</b>						
Chaste (log)	0.009 (0.005)	-0.062* (0.034)	0.010 (0.006)	0.043 (0.040)	0.010 (0.006)	0.043 (0.040)
F stat		21		28.26		22.73
Obs	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686	1686
Geo controls	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Full controls	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Prov. FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Lan. FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Region FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

## Illustrative cases of chaste women

**Lady Xiang (Susong, Anhui)** Widow of a scholar. After her husband's death, she lived frugally, managed household affairs for over a decade, cared devotedly for her mother-in-law, and studied medical texts to treat family members. She was praised by her lineage and later received an imperial commendation as a *chaste widow*.

**Daughter of Ji Chen (Taizhou, Jiangsu)** After her father's death, she supported her family through spinning and weaving. During mourning for her mother, she resisted sexual assault by a local man and died by suicide. The offender was punished, and she was posthumously honoured as “*Zhenlie*” (chaste and martyred).

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# References I

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