

***Woman* in Early Imperial China**

The socio-political forces and gender
norms surrounding elite women in the
Han Dynasty

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BA (Hons) LLB (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Word count: 95,313

Tuesday, 19 March 2019

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	III
PREFACE	VII
SUMMARY	IX
STATEMENT	XI
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	XIII
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
CHAPTER ONE. THE MOTHER OF THEM ALL: XIWANGMU (西王母).....	17
EARLY XIWANGMU	18
IS XIWANGMU ROYAL?	19
DAOIST DEITY XIWANGMU EMERGES	21
CHAPTER TWO. HAN DYNASTY IDEOLOGY AND WOMEN	23
CHAPTER THREE. THE FAMILY AS THE POLITICAL UNIT.....	39
CHAPTER FOUR. GENDER SEGREGATION.....	53
CHAPTER FIVE. BIOGRAPHY AS HISTORY IN THE HAN DYNASTY.....	61
SIMA QIAN	67
BAN GU.....	70
CHAPTER SIX. LIU XIANG AND THE <i>LIENÜZHUAN</i> (列女傳).....	75
LIU XIANG AND HIS CONTEXT.....	75
LIU XIANG – AUTHOR?.....	79
LIU XIANG’S MODUS OPERANDI	81
WHAT VIRTUES ARE EXTOLLED AND TO WHAT PURPOSE?	88
CHAPTER SEVEN. ‘WOMAN’ IN THE <i>LIENÜZHUAN</i> (列女傳).....	91
I. WOMEN AS ASSISTANTS TO MEN	92

II. WOMEN AS SELF-INTERESTED	104
III. WOMEN AS PARAGONS OF VIRTUE, MORALITY AND INTELLIGENCE	108
IV. WOMEN IN THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE.....	117
THE EFFECT OF THE <i>LIENÜZHUAN</i>	126
CHAPTER EIGHT. THE WRITINGS OF THE BAN WOMEN	131
BAN JIEYU'S POETRY	132
<i>NÜJIE</i> (女誡).....	136
BAN ZHAO'S MOTIVATION	140
WHAT DOES THE <i>NÜJIE</i> TEXT REVEAL?	143
OTHER WRITINGS	154
CHAPTER NINE. IMPERIAL WOMEN'S ROLES.....	157
HELPMATE TO THE EMPEROR.....	158
FEMALE REGENCY	164
WOMEN AS POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL TOOLS	167
IMPERIAL TRANSFER	172
WOMEN AS FOREIGN POLICY TOOLS	179
CHAPTER TEN. WOMEN WITHOUT VIRTUE, POLITICS IN THE IMPERIAL HAREM	183
THE ZHAO SISTERS.....	185
ALLEGATIONS OF WITCHCRAFT.....	190
CHAPTER ELEVEN. THE PRESENTATION OF EMPRESS LÜ	195
DUTIFUL CONSORT.....	196
REGENCY.....	197
EMPEROR.....	202
LEGACY	208
WHY THIS PRESENTATION OF EMPRESS LÜ?.....	210
CONCLUSION	215

APPENDIX - TIMELINE OF CHINESE EMPRESSES	219
<i>Western Han Dynasty</i>	219
<i>Eastern Han Dynasty</i>	221
BIBLIOGRAPHY	225

Preface

This thesis has been a long process. At university I focused on Roman history and gender studies, understandably as there were many interesting units of study and as I had studied Latin through the six years prior to university. I focused on gender in Roman history with emphasis on imperial women, namely empresses and female relatives of Roman emperors in the early imperial period.

I have undertaken most of this thesis part-time. I have worked full-time as a solicitor in private practice for most of my thesis research, law being a particularly demanding profession. This thesis has always been a daunting task and a welcome holiday from my professional work. I engaged in study of Chinese language, with admittedly mixed success, and have not dared venture far into the realms of classical Chinese. Always my focus has been on interpretation of discourse and the position of women within it, reflecting my background in gender studies. Power, its use and how it finds force has always been of great interest to me, and these factors are often best at play in history through familial settings as found in monarchic structures.

I am deeply indebted to Dr Gunner Mikkelsen; had he not come to Macquarie University, I would simply not have been able to undertake this thesis. I am very grateful for his knowledge, advice and support.

In 2007, I enrolled in a unit on Chinese history and I am forever thankful to Professor Sam Lieu, who convened that unit, for opening Chinese history to me. I would also like to thank Professor Bret Hinsch for his generous assistance during my undergraduate honours thesis work, which helped provide the springboard for this thesis, and for his endless research which produces such inspiring work.

Professional copyediting of this thesis was provided by Matthew Sidebotham of workwisewords editing in compliance with the university-endorsed *Guidelines for Editing Research Theses*.

Most importantly I would like to thank my husband James, my son Henry and my parents, from whom I have received every support, love and encouragement.

Summary

This thesis focuses on gender norms within literary and historical texts from Han Dynasty China as they pertain to women. It examines the role of women within that society, with an emphasis on women in the political sphere and imperial court. The study of such history is significant for its own sake. It also contributes to the understanding of the early underpinnings of the Confucian principles that still influence Chinese society and the Chinese cultural diaspora. Understanding how historical works nuance their discussion of women and analysing the motives for the presentation of women means historians are better equipped to critically evaluate the place of women throughout history.

This thesis engages in analysis of several key Han Dynasty texts that discuss ‘women’, the roles women held and important female members of the Han Dynasty political elite. Because of this historical analysis, it is possible to see that women in the Han Dynasty were politically significant, could hold real political power and yet were increasingly bound and constricted by notions of appropriate female behaviour as the dynasty progressed. The increasing removal of power from maternal relatives of the emperor resulted in historical sources often undermining the legitimacy of female political power within the Han Dynasty system. This was bolstered by an increased conservatism regarding female behaviour which attempted to constrain women’s roles and actions and, at the same time, stated that female action could have moral value.

Statement

I, Laura Mary Sowden, affirm that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. This thesis also fully references sources used in the drafting of this thesis in its bibliography and/or in its footnotes.

Name: Laura Mary Sowden

Date: 19 March 2019

List of Abbreviations

<i>AM</i>	<i>Asia Major</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
Dubs I-III	Dubs, H.H., (trans) <i>The History of the Former Han Dynasty</i> , I-III (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1938)
<i>HHS</i>	<i>Hou Hanshu</i> 後漢書 (<i>Book of the Later Han</i>), by Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445/46)
<i>HJAS</i>	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hanshu</i> 漢書 (<i>Book of Han</i> or <i>History of the Former Han</i>), by Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE)
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JAS</i>	<i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>
<i>LNZ</i>	<i>Lienüzhuan</i> 列女傳 (<i>Biographies of Various Women</i>), by Liu Xiang 劉向 [刘向] (77-6 BCE)
Nienhauser1-11	Nienhauser, W.H., (trans) <i>The Grand Scribe's Records</i> , I-II (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).
<i>NJ</i>	<i>Nüjie</i> 女誡 (<i>Admonitions for Women</i>), by Ban Zhao 班昭 (45-116 CE)
<i>SJ</i>	<i>Shiji</i> 史記 [史记] (<i>Historical Records</i> or <i>Records of the Grand Historian</i>), by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145/135-86 BCE)
<i>TP</i>	<i>T'oung pao</i>
Watson I-II	Watson, B., (trans) <i>Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty</i> , I-II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)

Introduction

History is ideological. History is political, holding within it assumptions, norms and beliefs. ‘Historical reality is unavoidably veiled in observation, feeling, interpretation and the process of representation.’¹ It is not some Rankean truth but an intellectual exercise, an exploration and analysis of the past through each historian’s lens. Historical discourse, and the socio-political norms that discourse reveals, is at the heart of this thesis.

Through analysis of women in the written discourse of Han Dynasty China, this thesis will critically examine:

1. The formation and impact of the contemporaneous literature, namely the writing of history, on women.
2. The *Lienüzhuan* (列女傳), and specifically:
 - a. whether this text operated as a proscriptive force on Han women; and
 - b. whether this was part of the *raison d’être* for Liu Xiang (劉向 [刘向]) (79–8 BCE).
3. Whether texts engage in restrictive policing of women and their behaviours and if so how this occurred.
4. How Han Dynasty women were politically and morally powerful.
5. Whether women were the political tools of:
 - a. their male peers; and
 - b. the historians who composed their literary echoes.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the line of what is legitimate and what is not when it comes to female power, remembering that this line was policed by male peers, male authors and, at times, women enacting male views. To do this, this thesis commences chronologically with an examination of mythical women, then —turns to the historical context of the Han Dynasty. From there, this thesis analyses the historiography of the Han Dynasty as it pertains to women. The heart of this thesis—and, appropriately, the middle point of it—is Liu Xiang’s text, after which female authorship is discussed. This leads into an examination of political women in the Han Dynasty, crystallising in an examination of the most notorious woman of the dynasty, Empress Lü. By using such a structure this thesis

¹ Anthony Clark, *Ban Gu’s History of Early China* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 61.

seeks to synthesise the literary portrays of Liu Xiang and Ban Zhao with the historical events in the Dynasty. It is appropriate to conclude with Empress Lü as she was an embodiment of actual political power in the Han Dynasty and the subject of substantial written discourse.

By way of context, in the same vein as the warring states before unification under the Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty—the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE) and Eastern Han (25–220 CE) Dynasties, with the Xin Dynasty (9–23 CE) intervening—was a monarchical power structure. The structure was modelled such that the maintenance of the most powerful position, formerly king, and now emperor, was determined by familial bloodlines combined with political influence. As a patriarchal society, this monarchy focused particularly on male bloodlines. Membership of a family, their bloodline and the identity of the father were the determiners of who inherited the highest position of leadership.

The emperor was the person in whom the most power was vested, theoretically the ultimate source of law and leadership. Unsurprisingly, the Han Dynasty also had a complex power structure of empresses, empresses dowager, kings, bureaucrats, concubines, court officials, military officers, eunuchs and important consort families. This power structure surrounding the emperor is where imperial Han women and their elite counterparts were located.

Monarchy as a governmental system had a substantial history in China. In the Warring States period, smaller Chinese states had functioned under their own royal families. The central location of the new Han Dynasty imperial court and family meant consorts could remain in close contact with their families, unlike the Warring States period when wives and concubines might find themselves far from their own familial support structures. This thesis will argue this had a defining effect on imperial women and Han Dynasty discourse regarding women.

Contemporary literary and historical works from the Han Dynasty demonstrate that in Han Dynasty China, elite and imperial women were politically active and politically powerful.² Indeed, women were often active participants in their own society, rather than mere inert victims of male patriarchy.³ Imperial women, eunuchs and court officials all competed for

² Historians often incorrectly declare that Chinese history often minimises the role of women. See Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History – A New Manual, Fourth Edition* (Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 173. In the Han Dynasty, the opposite may be true; in certain instances, the role of women is emphasised. Indeed, as Wilkinson states, in the Han Dynasty elite women's names were recorded in the same way as men's, a departure from prior and future practice (p. 174).

³ Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 2.

favour and influence through the relationships they established with the Emperor and each other. In this context, any weapon used could be useful, and some individuals and factions found ammunition in the imposition of gender discourses that attempted to restrict female political power and influence.

Evidence that individuals acted in a seemingly independent way should not be treated as evidence that freedom existed for Han women. The gender- and age-based hierarchies that prevailed throughout the Han Dynasty, in addition to notions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, meant no one enjoyed freedom. Participants in any society may question the extent to which complete freedom is permitted, or even desirable. Such philosophical musing is beyond the purview of this thesis.

Throughout the Han Dynasty, women were affected by normative standards regulating their behaviour, and these standards were dichotomous. For instance, sexuality was considered distracting and many sought to restrict its presence in the imperial court and elite culture. Yet the central feature of a system in which one man takes many consorts is one man having multiple sexual partners for the conception of children.⁴ In such a system, Han Dynasty women suffered from inequality of sexual access. Polygamy was the exclusive preserve of men and, in this regard, women were arguably rendered the objects and property of their male partners.⁵

Nevertheless, the system that Han Dynasty imperial women inhabited enabled them—and sometimes incited them—to become politically involved and powerful. This happened even as the ancient sources frequently alter, minimise or accentuate their activities and lives, due to the authors' ulterior motives. Ancient literary histories and texts were generally the repositories of male depictions of women. Han China was a patriarchal system in which men were more educated. Equally, men occupied all official positions, including those pertaining to the maintenance of the imperial library, which afforded them generally unfettered access to a wide variety of texts to study. As a result, female texts are few and far between. Fortunately, there is one substantial exception, the *Nüjie* (女誡) or *Admonitions for Women*

⁴ Loewe described this as 'the liberal arrangements for providing the Emperor with consorts'. Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 255.

⁵ Sin Yee Chan, 'Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analects* and *Mencius*', *Asian Philosophy* 10.2. (2000), p. 128.

by Ban Zhao (班昭) (45–116 CE). This thesis will explore whether female authorship of the *Nüjie* in fact provides a female voice.

This thesis critically examines the formation (and impact) of the writing of history and literature on women. It also posits a possible reality of elite women's political power. The subtext of this thesis, then, is: *why* are women presented as they are?

The corollary to Han Dynasty women is Han Dynasty men. In later Chinese history, a study of Buddhism without a study of Daoism has been seen as somewhat absurd;⁶ there is similarly an absurdity in studying women in the Han Dynasty as if they can be examined in isolation. Thus, although an understanding and analysis of Han Dynasty women is the focus of this thesis, such a study offers insights about gender more broadly, including the idea of man. Women often understood their own gender in a binary relationship with male counterparts.⁷ It is vital to remember that a binary relationship is not one of equality, only interdependence. Equality, as a normative and desirable concept, meant nothing in Han Dynasty China.

Historians should not transplant contemporary sensibilities onto the past.⁸ Gender relations are cultural and vary according to time and place. It is abundantly clear that the Han Dynasty was a very different time and a very different place to the context of the author of this thesis. There can be no expectation that a mirror of modern societies and lives be found in the Han Dynasty. This does not mean, however, that modern theory has no place in historical study. Feminist theories are highly relevant to this thesis, as they provide the means and conceptual framework to critique historical presentations of women. Enormous progress has been made in the study of ancient women since the question of 'woman' and feminist theories infiltrated western academia and its cultural milieu.

As outlined above, history, like much discourse, is inevitably not an objective exercise but one infected by subjectivity. The only counter to that inevitable subjectivity is for an author to be as transparent as possible regarding their subjective tendencies. It is in this spirit that

⁶ James Robson, 'The Polymorphous Space of the Southern Marchmount [Nanyue]', *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995), p. 222.

⁷ Bret Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History* (Lanham, MD: Rowland & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), p. 2. Normative gender identities are something explored frequently by Hinsch and, in his examination of masculinities, he necessarily provides insights into women, just as this thesis will necessarily engage in identification of female as opposed to male.

⁸ This is something identified as particularly important by Hinsch; see the introduction to Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), p. 4.

this thesis declares that while it is not its aim to proselytise feminist theory, historical gender studies are indebted to the feminist movement for their very existence.

Feminist theory has long been engaged in analysis of female identity and its formation. Judith Butler explored the role of performative acts in the construction of gender:

What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo.⁹

Gender can be seen to be a social construct that is then performed over a period of time by individuals and groups of individuals.¹⁰ Just as gender can be viewed as a construct, the roles that Han Dynasty imperial women undertook were constructed behaviours, repeated and reproduced to create defined and, most importantly, socially acceptable roles and behaviours.

Women in Han Dynasty China performed the circumscribed acts of ‘woman’, and this assisted in the ongoing creation of what being female was. By working *within* the system, Han Dynasty imperial women frequently expressed and acted in conformity with male views and expectations of women. Women who operated *outside* the boundaries of this system did not survive male history untainted. This did not mean that Han women were powerless, only that female agency which did not incur censure necessarily took place within the system and its prescribed codes of behaviour.

Agency in the imperial court could be, but was not necessarily, independent. For imperial women, it was necessary they did not appear as independent agents (or agents of their families); they must be agents for propriety or another higher cause. In the usual course of events, the emperor—the ultimate expression of agency and power—was the conduit through which imperial women in practice usually expressed power. It was either via influence over the emperor or by virtue of their relationship to the emperor that women possessed power. It is the empress dowagers’ place in the hierarchy of the imperial family, and her maternal hold (biological if not actual) over the emperor, that provide her a powerbase. The empress dowager may then use her familial connections to appoint various positions and exert general influence in the imperial court to cement that powerbase.

⁹ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Arts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988), p. 520.

¹⁰ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 3.

Modern ideology often imposes a public/private divide that has traditionally meant a focus on women in political history has been an exception rather than the rule. In this view, women are part of the history of the private, separate from the public concept of government. The personal in a monarchy is public (or political) and the public/political is personal. Familial rule and familial power structures, by virtue of their construction, merge these two sometimes distinguished ‘worlds’. Although Han Dynasty ideology and culture did create male and female spaces, the imperial family and court was a place where these boundaries were frequently trampled.

Literature Review

Even in modern historical analysis of the Han Dynasty there is the danger that the fantastical image of women in history (as the ancient sources present them) will suffer mere repetition of the original accounts. This danger is realised, for example, in the relevant chapter of *The Cambridge History of China*. This is understandable, given the comprehensive summary provided in the Cambridge History. The outcome can also be an uncritical confirmation of the original sources.¹¹ When discussing consort families and their power the author of the chapter, Michael Loewe, repeats a number of examples, including Empress Lü (吕雉) breaking a promise to her husband regarding advancement of her own family and Empress Wei's (韦皇后) expansionist policies.¹² Further, Empress Lü is presented (much as she is the ancient sources) as a source of ‘divisive threats’¹³ and her rule as unlawful domination.¹⁴ Loewe's comment is an accurate representation of the original source material but takes readers no further. Loewe does highlight that the standard histories contain bias, which negatively affects Empress Lü.¹⁵ This caveat, however, likely does not outweigh the substantial time devoted to repetition of the Liu family line.

Regarding Emperor Cheng (成帝) (r. 33–7 BCE) and the ‘infamous’ influence of the Zhao sisters, the relevant chapter of the *Cambridge History of China* recounts the contents of the

¹¹ Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. I: Ch'in and Han Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹² Michael Loewe, ‘The Former Han Dynasty’, in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, p. 107. Note that Empress Wei was a former dancing girl demonstrating the flexible approach of the early Han to the matter of consort.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Hanshu without analysis.¹⁶ Loewe states that the Zhao sisters and the emperor himself were involved in the killing of sons of the emperor and other women of the imperial court.¹⁷ When it comes to the chapters addressing the Han Dynasty, the *Cambridge History of China* renders a faithful account according to Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書) and does not offer further historical analysis of the presentation.

Unthinking repetition is an easy historical model in which many partake.¹⁸ Swann offers a vital contribution, yet it is again a contribution lacking critical analysis. Certain historical representations of women are, in many ways, simply retold, further perpetuating their mythological hold on gender discourse. The presentation of women in Han discourse reveals the social and political forces that dictated female political involvement, as well as how that involvement evolved throughout the Han Dynasty—a period of four centuries during which social values did not stagnate.¹⁹

An in-depth examination of the primary sources for this thesis is provided in Chapter Five. This review focuses on modern historical work regarding the Han Dynasty. The study of Chinese history has been a long, extensive, detailed and contentious landscape throughout China's history. It is understandably only more recently that western historians have become seriously interested and invested in early Chinese history. There is, of course, a long history intertwining China with Europe. Indeed, in the Han Dynasty China became aware of Rome and its empire and Rome likewise became aware of China. Silk Road interactions and, later, the travels of Marco Polo and his family (among others) in the 13th century resulted in reports of China (and its Mongol rulers at that time). From the point at which the British Empire sought and obtained unfettered access to China and opium flowed in during the mid-19th century, there has been extensive cross-cultural exchange and movement. Since abandoning its 'closed status' in the middle of the 20th century, China has been increasingly recognised by other countries as an important country and ultimately a global power, and this increased profile makes it unsurprising that, since the turn of the century, more substantial works examining Chinese history have emerged in the west.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China: Background, Ancestry, Life, and Writings of the Most Celebrated Chinese Woman of Letters* (New York, NY: The Century Co., 1932, reissued Russell & Russell, 1968).

¹⁹ Miranda Brown and Rafe de Crespigny, 'Adoption in Han China', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 52 (2009), p. 237.

In this regard, the field of translation work is significant, considering modern and classical Chinese are not seminal parts of a western education in the same way that Latin and Greek long have (or had) been. There continues to be a cultural (and linguistic) impediment to western scholars when researching Chinese history. It is important to remember that translation work is often a cross-cultural encounter in which a translator's own cultural context can shine through.²⁰

In the French field, Édouard Chavannes published five volumes of translation work on the *Shiji* (史記) or *Historical Records* between 1895 and 1905.²¹ A sixth volume was later produced by Max Kaltenmark and published in 1969, consisting of translations of chapters 48 to 50 edited from Chavannes' manuscript, Kaltenmark's own translations of chapters 51 to 52, and a general index of volumes 1 to 6. Chavannes had earlier published Chapter 28, *Treatise on the Feng and Shan* by Sima Qian (司馬遷).²² Chavannes' comprehensive five-volume translation into French, which marked the first translation into a western language of Sima Qian's classic text, encouraged further scholarship and provided access to this seminal Chinese text to a western readership. It was at this point that the study of Chinese history was more broadly introduced to western readership—without which the very existence of this thesis would be unlikely. The 1950s marked explorations from Nancy Lee Swann, Burton Watson and Homer Dubs, who published collaborative translations of the *Hanshu* (漢書) throughout the 1930s to the 1950s. They were followed by William Nienhauser, who edited a ten-volume translation of the *Shiji* published between the late 1980s and 2016.

In terms of modern scholarship, Anne Safford, Nancy Lee Swann and Albert O'Hara arguably signpost the start of dedicated western attention to gender in the Han Dynasty. They also predate the subsequent waves of revisionist examinations that influence so much of historical examination today. In 1891, Safford produced an early English language version, loosely labelled a translation, of Liu Xiang's *Typical Women of China*. It is worth noting

²⁰ Lu Fang, 'Translation, Manipulation and the Transfer of Negative Cultural Images', *The Translator* 15.2 (2009), p. 328.

²¹ Édouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien traduits et annotés*, 5 vols. (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve, 1969).

²² Édouard Chavannes, *Le Traité sur les sacrifices Fong et Chan de Se-ma T'sien, traduit en français* (Pékin: Impr. du Pei-T'ang, 1890).

that it was, as O'Hara highlights, a translation of a later Ming Dynasty text rather than the original *Lienüzhuan* (列女傳) or *Biographies of Various Women*.²³

Safford's translation faces the problem of using a number of unidentified texts, including the main Ming version of the *Lienüzhuan* on which she based most of the translation.²⁴ Lu Fang identifies the Ming text used as that of Wang Daokun (汪道昆) in the 16th century and notes that Safford also includes contents from at least six other texts.²⁵ Indeed, she adopts a completely different structure from the *Lienüzhuan*, instead focusing—like Ban Zhao's *Nüjie*—on four virtues. She also removes the original titles used by Liu Xiang, thereby removing context (namely, location and character names).²⁶ The composite nature of Safford's work mirrors the process undertaken by Liu Xiang himself and arguably renders her as much as a compiler as translator.²⁷ It is thus not surprising, in view of her 1890s context, that she emphasises the self-mutilation stories in her work and often edits stories containing female strengths to diminish the role of women.²⁸ This approach no doubt assisted in the aim of Safford's work, which was to create awe, pity and concern among her Christian readership.

It is worth remembering that the 1890s is early for a translation of Liu Xiang's work, and that it was by a female scholar to boot is somewhat remarkable. The role of women is not solely a modern feminist fascination. Safford was a Christian missionary in China in the late 19th century. The 1890s western context is explicit; as the editor's second edition preface states,

[t]he position and influence of women in China is a subject of the deepest interest and importance, for much of the weakness of the nation at the present critical moment is to be attributed to the degradation of the female sex.²⁹

²³ Albert O'Hara, *The Position of Women in Early China According to the Lie Nü Chuan 'The Biographies of Eminent Chinese Women'* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), p. 4.

²⁴ Lu, 'Negative Cultural Images', p. 334.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 338.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 335 and 346.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 341 and 342.

²⁹ Anna Safford, *Typical Women in China* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh Limited 1899), preface.

The editor's preface then identifies and disapproves of practices such as foot-binding and opium use.³⁰ The practice of binding women's feet and use of opium, being much later phenomena in Chinese history, have nothing to do with the Han Dynasty or Liu Xiang's work. However, both were topical issues in the 1890s. The only relevant topic mentioned is polygamy. The editor thus speaks to the contemporary concerns of western visitors or temporary residents in Chinese society. The approach also smacks of orientalism; Safford, with her Christian and white context, is condescending and yet sympathetic to the plight of Chinese women in her own time.³¹ Indeed the editor's second edition preface states that,

[t]he possibilities of the women of China are almost boundless, Christian education is extending its beneficial influences among them [and] these possibilities must soon be realised.³²

As Lu has highlighted, 'the main impression the reader is left with is of women who are submissive, ignorant and superstitious'.³³ Safford's own introduction is more redeeming; she avoids the faux pas of the man who edited her text after her death, stating simply that she seeks to 'exhibit the Chinese ideas of what a woman's character and training should be'.³⁴

Yet the issue of textual approach and the problematic nature of the generalisations of the text remain. The 1891 introduction states:

This book, we are told, is read by all cultured native women, and the highest aspiration of many of them is to obtain fame like that of its heroines. Its influence has extended through centuries, an apt illustration of the tendency of the national mind to 'go on in its old ruts by sheer *vis inertias*'.³⁵

This comment suggests that the approach to women in Chinese culture has remained unchanged throughout the centuries.³⁶ As this thesis will show, approaches to women changed during the Han Dynasty itself, let alone the nearly 2000 years that followed. Safford notes that the tales she translates were being emulated by Chinese women in the 19th

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lu, 'Negative Cultural Images', p. 328.

³⁴ Safford, *Typical Women*, introduction.

³⁵ Ibid, p. vi.

³⁶ Lu, 'Negative Cultural Images', p. 335.

century.³⁷ This comment, which could be criticised as a broad generalisation, does however indicate the powerful discourse regarding women that Liu Xiang arguably sculpted.

Nancy Lee Swann also contributed significantly with her translation and analysis of Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* in 1932. Swann's work was pioneering and its contribution to the field substantial, even though scholarship over the intervening 80 years has rendered her scholarship somewhat irrelevant.³⁸ Further, Swann's own 1930s conservative setting results in her using Ban Zhao and the *Nüjie* as an example to emulate, rather than providing critical analysis of womanhood or Ban Zhao's text. As Hardy highlights, Swann argues that 'the feminine virtues are immutable, and what is required by modern conditions is a restatement rather than a rejection of Pan Chao's instructions'.³⁹ This is approach renders much of her analysis outdated. In view of the development of gender studies as a field in its own right, apart from general historical fields of research, it is problematic that Swann offers no critical reading of the text and prefers to wholeheartedly support the original contents as part of some feminising agenda.⁴⁰ Having said this, the primary course material, as Hardy points out, has not expanded since Swann's work and it remains a vital starting point.⁴¹ Significantly, she highlights a migration from the autocratic example of the first emperor of the Qin towards the authority of philosophy and ultimately virtue (possibly over power).⁴²

It is important to remember that Swann's purpose was to provide a comprehensive exploration of Ban Zhao, not to critically examine womanhood in Ban Zhao's time or even her text. It is likely for this reason that modern historians find the work somewhat unsatisfying in its approach. As a trailblazer who predated the emergence of gender in the 1970s, Swann can be forgiven for what might be characterised as an uncritical approach, especially when bearing in mind her purpose. Indeed, the book was met with enthusiasm and applause in the 1930s⁴³ (although her contemporary Shryock outlined a number of what he

³⁷ Ibid, p. 336.

³⁸ Grant Hardy, 'Pan Chao: Foremost Women Scholar of China by Nancy Lee Swann', *JAS* 61 (2002), p. 712.

³⁹ Ibid. See also Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 318.

⁴⁰ Hardy, 'Pan Chao by Swann', p. 712.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 713. In fact, Hardy labels Swann's text as definitive.

⁴² Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 6.

⁴³ John Shryock, 'Book Review: Nancy Lee Swann, Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China', *JAOS* 53.1 (1933), p. 92. C.B. Malone, 'Book Review: Nancy Lee Swann, Pan Chao, the Foremost Woman Scholar of China', *Pacific Historical Review* 2.2 (1933), p. 240. It is telling that Shryock refers to Miss Swann and Malone refers to her as Dr Swann, arguably demonstrating gender at play in the 1930s academic community.

termed minor criticisms).⁴⁴ Swann's work is comprehensive in its range and provides a very good context for the discussion regarding Ban Zhao and her work, life and views. Swann (and O'Hara) are significant because they mark the commencement of meaningful and conscientious examination by modern western scholarship in China.

O'Hara's examination might easily be dismissed, noting that his preface labels Liu Xiang as a compiler, which misrepresents the significance of his work.⁴⁵ O'Hara's introduction demonstrates a sound knowledge of China and a healthy irritation toward those who generalise regarding the Far East.⁴⁶ Indeed, his introduction places the reader on notice that the examination of Chinese women is under constant attack from translations ranging from loose to selective.⁴⁷ He also admits that there are only occasional references to women in the philosophical canon for early China.⁴⁸

Yet O'Hara, like Safford, labels Liu Xiang a Confucian. There is little examination of what that means or how Liu Xiang's appreciation or interpretation of Confucian theory might be divergent from the Master himself, who, after all, had little time for women in his text. In fairness, however, O'Hara does examine the context of Liu Xiang, including his role within the imperial courts of Emperor Yuan (元帝) (r. 49–33 BCE) and Emperor Cheng.⁴⁹ Further, he pays attention to the legacy of Liu Xiang's text as a guide for all literate women and via its conversion into illustrated scenes for additional influence.⁵⁰ It is important to note, although the focus of this thesis is not on textual transmission, that O'Hara used the Sung edition, dating to the 13th century, for his translation.⁵¹

O'Hara's work in 1945 on the *Lienüzhuan* stood alone, until the publication in 2014 (during the writing of this thesis) of Anne Kinney's *Exemplary Women of Early China*. It is often through such translations that the best analysis regarding the texts, their authors and their societies have been found. Except for Swann, O'Hara and Kinney, few have been concerned with women specifically and there has, apart from Kinney, been a lack of critical analysis of

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

⁴⁵ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. ix.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 6 when discussing Ayscough's work; and p. 4 when discussing Safford.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the various editions of the *Lienüzhuan* see Sherry J. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions for Women's Lives A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 26.

Han Dynasty imperial women as presented by their contemporaries. Indeed, at the commencement of this thesis in 2010 no such English-language work existed.

Kinney's 2014 text places Liu Xiang in his context and provides lively and readable translations of the *Lienüzhuan*. As Kinney tells us, Liu Xiang's work 'is the earliest extant book in the Chinese tradition solely devoted to the moral education of women'.⁵² This description seems to have been influenced by Liu Xiang's own spin, however; as Kinney highlights, and as this thesis will discuss, the text elevated but also constricted women, curtailing what they could and could not be (generally to the benefit of their male counterparts). When we ask why it does this, the answer is to limit the political power of consort families by:

1. imposing restrictions on what good women would do (which they would imbibe and exhibit through their own behaviour, thus preventing unvirtuous behaviour);
2. providing a standard by which women could be judged by others; and
3. warning of the disaster that could unfold if the good women were not favoured.

The easiest way to control a human being is to encourage and motivate them to control themselves; this is what culture attempts to do. Kinney highlights this when she refers to Ban Gu's reading of Liu Xiang's text.⁵³ Kinney's focus is on the translation of the text and her role as translator. She ably translates and provides frequent annotations to elucidate identities and nuances in the text for readers.⁵⁴ Even so, those focused on textual accuracy in translation have found fault with the translation of certain terms. Notably, Major identifies *junzi*, which Kinney translates as 'a person of discernment', as inappropriate since the term refers to a gentleman or nobleman par excellence, like Confucius, and when a *junzi* expresses a view in the text it suggests the views of Confucius.⁵⁵ Major's concern is that by de-emphasising the role of Confucius in the *Lienüzhuan* Kinney's translation 'obscures the degree to which the text was compiled by Liu Xiang as a contribution to the development of Confucian ideology, or *ru* (儒), in the Han Dynasty period'.⁵⁶

⁵² Anne Behnke Kinney, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienüzhuan of Liu Xiang* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. xv.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁵⁴ John Major, 'Book Review: Anne Behnke Kinney, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan* of Liu Xiang', *TP* 100.4–5 (2014), p. 501.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

Arguably, a translator can become too closely connected to the author, such that there is a kind of alliance between translator and original author that may make difficult a more detached analysis. Kinney comments, regarding Sima Qian's preference that emperors give wealthy or noble women imperial honour, that,

we can surmise that in his view, a poor girl was unlikely to have received either the kind of upbringing that would enable her to interact on an equal footing with the elite or the sort of education that would allow her to understand her duties as a helpmate to the supreme rule.⁵⁷

It is the latter, and surely not the former, which is true. Sima Qian did not favour female power and his view is not that women be able to interact on an equal footing. Further, Kinney seems to assert that the expansion of the bureaucracy opened the door to more numerous and bureaucratic positions for women.⁵⁸ As we will see in this thesis, women had difficulty when ruling as regent simply interacting with the bureaucracy, let alone being an accepted part of it. As Wang comments,

The women in the *Lienüzhuan* are not just seen subordinating themselves to men, but are importantly perceived as a means to sustain dynastic power or family prestige.⁵⁹

This is a positive spin on a situation in which women were a means to an end rather than being an end themselves.⁶⁰

Importantly, other works and historians have made valuable contributions through texts offering analysis and translations. Bret Hinsch has made an invaluable contribution to the furtherance of gender studies in the field of early imperial China. Through full-length publications and shorter articles, his sustained focus on this field has furthered the area of research and provided a higher profile to early imperial Chinese gender studies. From the *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* to *Masculinity in Chinese History*, Hinsch has produced an ongoing series of novel and detailed examinations concerning gender in early China. Hinsch's *Women in Early Imperial China* provides an accessible and invaluable insight into Han women. Its concern is more 'everyday', a perfectly logical and laudable focus

⁵⁷ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. xviii.

⁵⁸ Ibid. She refers to her own text, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2004), pp. 119–31.

⁵⁹ Robin R. Wang, 'Book Review: Anne Behnke Kinney, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan* of Liu Xiang', *JAOS* 135.2 (2015), p. 418.

⁶⁰ A la Immanuel Kant.

considering the small numbers of the elite and political classes compared to the substantial number of ‘everyday’ Han Chinese. It is in Hinsch’s numerous journal articles that a more particular focus on gender and how it was defined and acted out in Han China is to be found.

Lisa Raphals’ 1998 text *Sharing the Light* promoted modern gender discourse in examining early Chinese history. She maintains a positive approach, focusing on what women could achieve while working within a system that ultimately limited their agency. Raphals, like the other historians discussed above, makes her backdrop clear when she refers to the May Fourth movement. She is the only author, aside from Hinsch, to engages squarely with gender discourse and gender as a concept, or rather a product, of *epistemological turmoil*.⁶¹ Interestingly, it might also be said that gender can be a collective existential question. However, Raphals’ positivity places some limitations on her text. For instance, she does not adequately reconcile the tension between Ban Zhao’s role in naturalising and promoting female subordination and the privileged position Ban Zhao held.⁶²

Raphals refuses to interpret what she sees in the Han Dynasty as ‘representations of female subjectivity’ and prefers instead to focus on the positive agency she does perceive.⁶³ This, in many ways, should be lauded for the positive effect she can have on perceptions of Han women and how modern women perceive their own abilities in relation to those historical figures. Returning to the existential theme, the bedrock question would then be, what agency can an individual have while adhering to the rules prevailing in their relevant cultural context? This more probing question is far beyond the scope of this thesis; however, it does demonstrate the very intimate effect of culture, not as an external force but as one that each individual enacts in their own way, including enacting it upon themselves.

This thesis is not assuming that Raphals’ is the best approach, as to obscure female helplessness is to sell a dream that, when awake, proves a tragic loss. It is significant, however, that Raphals highlights something very valuable within the *Lienüzhuan*; namely, that women display intellectual prowess in the same way as male counterparts and sometime more capably.⁶⁴ Equally, she emphasises how Liu Xiang placed women and gender relations as of primary importance to significant issues, be they correct action, imperial decisions or

⁶¹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 2.

⁶² Li-Hsiang Lee, ‘Book Review: Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China*’, *Philosophy East & West* 50.1 (2000), p. 152.

⁶³ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

familial concerns. Arguably, there is no conclusive account of gender through the women and texts she examines.⁶⁵

This thesis is indebted to the work of these historians, particularly when it comes to translations. As outlined in the preface, the author of this thesis has moderate knowledge of Chinese language and minimal classical Chinese language; thus, she is indebted to the work of others in this regard to enable her more broad-ranging analysis to take place.

Han Dynasty authors used famous women from earlier times to reflect and comment on the role of Han Dynasty imperial women. Han Dynasty imperial women were privileged owners of economic wealth and power. By virtue of their situation and place in their respective societies, these women were also the subject of history and literature. This has meant they became vital examples of 'woman'. Through depictions of women in historical and literary discourse, female norms were established that outlined what being a woman was and what political action was acceptable for a woman.

Some imperial women are presented as virtuous, others damned as vixens. This is not an expression of these women being inherently bad or inherently good. Rather, such judgements reveal the preferences of the individual historian and the political context they inhabited. Uncovering such preferences helps modern historians explain the sometimes-inconsistent treatment and portrayal of historical women. Critical analysis of the historical presentation of these women is of great importance to modern culture. Contemporary women are still bound by a historical milieu which simplistically caricatures many Chinese empresses as cruelty personified.⁶⁶ The development of culture as it affected women within the imperial setting is a vital to any exploration of how bound Han Dynasty women became.

This thesis critiques discourse found in the relevant ancient sources. Yet, simultaneously, this thesis is inescapably dependent on those sources to decipher the place of women. History is thus a magnificent intellectual exercise testing both the skill and the sanity of the historian.

⁶⁵ Lee, 'Lisa Raphals, Sharing the Light', p. 152.

⁶⁶ Susan Dixon, 'Conclusion – The Enduring Theme: Domineering Dowagers and Scheming Concubines', in B. Garlick, S. Dixon & P. Allen (eds.), *Stereotypes of Women in Power, Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1992), discusses the effect on modern female politicians.

Chapter One. The Mother of Them All: Xiwangmu (西王母)

This thesis will demonstrate that Han Dynasty women were powerful both politically and morally. Where did this power come from: money, familial relationships or the favour of the emperor? Female power could not have been possible without early examples of powerful women. Mythical women were arguably the earliest example of women with power and enabled women to hold different types of power at much later times.

Much of ancient Chinese mythology revolved around ancestral worship. Such ancestors became deities, and this was combined with the reverence for natural forces in the universe. Ancestresses formed part of this religious fabric. The hegemony of ancestor worship in Han religion was only slightly amended, rather than challenged, by the Han focus on Confucianism. As Keightley comments,

[a]ncestor worship, by its very interest in honouring and replicating the deed and beliefs of the ancestors, is bound to be a powerful force for conservatism in any theocratic political culture.⁶⁷

It is thus not surprising that we find Xiwangmu (西王母), traditionally translated ‘Queen Mother of the West’ but also often translated ‘Royal Mother of the West’, to have her female power in an accepted normative location, a semi-royal maternal ancestor who demands devotion in return for protection from disaster.

Ancient Chinese mythology contained fewer goddesses than gods; as stated by Anne Birrell, ‘goddesses are not equal in importance to the gods in terms of function, cult, or continuity of mythological tradition’.⁶⁸ There is the early tradition of Nügua (女娲), an independent ruler and cosmological goddess.⁶⁹ Nügua had the body of a snake and the head of a human.⁷⁰ She was responsible for the creation of mankind and remedying a state of chaos by creating

⁶⁷ David Keightley, ‘The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of the Late Shang Dynasty’, in William Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 23.

⁶⁸ Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 160.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 164. Keith McMahon., ‘Women Rulers in Imperial China’, *Nan Nü* 15-2 (2013) p. 199. McMahon refers to the use of Nügua by Empress Wu Zetian of the Later Tang Dynasty.

⁷⁰ Robin R. Wang, (ed.), *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), pp. 96–7.

pillars to hold heaven above and separate from earth.⁷¹ In the *Leizi* (列子) and the *Huainanzi* (淮南子), Nügua is depicted as undertaking supernatural feats, such as breaking the legs of a turtle to support the four corners of the earth.⁷² Yet Ban Gu relegates Nügua to the status of a minor deity.⁷³ Another female deity Earth Queen Houtu (后土) had worship of her inaugurated by Emperor Wu in 114 BCE.⁷⁴ In this regard, Birrell states that,

[h]er gradual degradation from her ancient eminence was partly due to the content of some eminent and educated men for animalian gods, and partly due to an increasing dominating or masculinity in the elite social doctrine.⁷⁵

Male doctrine may have held sway; however, it did not remove or relegate Xiwangmu, who ruled Mount Kunlun (崑崙山), was linked to the cult of immortality, inspired devotion and was prayed to for rescue in times of trouble.⁷⁶ There were many divergent images and concepts of Xiwangmu; considering her long history, this is hardly surprising.

Early Xiwangmu

By the time of the Han Dynasty, Xiwangmu may have been some 1000 years old in Chinese mythology. It is important to recognise that there is debate in this regard. An extract from the Shang oracle bones seems to indicate Xiwangmu may date back to 1300 BCE. The extract has been translated as follows.

Pyromantic crack-making on the day *jen-shen* (the 9th). Divination performed: Yu-sacrifice to the Eastern Mother and to the Western Mother. This will be agreeable.⁷⁷

It is questionable whether seven likely references to Dongmu (東母) 'Eastern mother' in Shang oracle bone shards can be considered sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that this eastern mother was one and the same as Xiwangmu.⁷⁸

⁷¹ John Major, S.; Queen, Sarah A.; Meyer, Andrew Seth; and Harold D. Roth, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁷² Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 97.

⁷³ Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 164.

⁷⁴ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷⁶ Jean M. James, 'An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu during the Han Dynasty', *Artibus Asiae* 55.1/2 (1995), p. 17.

⁷⁷ Riccardo Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China: A New Approach to the Hsi-wang mu 西王母 Problem', *TP* 74.1/3 (1988), p. 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Cahill posits that there are two types of deities contained within the oracle bones, natural force deities and ancestral deities, suggesting Xiwangmu was in fact a combination of these two types, being a queen mother of the Chinese people and the embodiment of the west as a force of nature.⁷⁹ While Xiwangmu has a female counterpart (eastern mother) in the Shang oracle bone inscription, she later has a male counterpart. There was possibly a process by which the eastern mother was diminished into a male consort, and later into obscurity, whereas Xiwangmu continued to elicit devotion. The introduction of a male counterpart did not place her into an ever-diminishing role of consort; rather, this is true of her male counterpart.⁸⁰ It is likely the central role of mothers and ancestral worship in Chinese culture that enabled Xiwangmu to hold fast throughout time. In this way, Xiwangmu speaks through the ages to the prominence of mothers among the Han.

The earliest text addressing Xiwangmu is the *Shan Hai Jing*, which describes her as,

a therianthrope being, in part human, but with a leopard's tail and a tiger's teeth, who wears a jade sheng in her untidy hair.⁸¹

This demonstrates the hybridisation of mythology, where the human and animal is combined and expressed through the ability to shapeshift. The ability to control the form in which one exists is a true expression of power, making Xiwangmu supremely powerful.

Is Xiwangmu royal?

While the general connotation for *wang* (王) is royalty, Goldin has posited that the use of *wang* does not indicate Xiwangmu was a queen.⁸² Thus, the common English translation (or rather title) 'Queen Mother of the West' may be inaccurate. Goldin asserts that this is particularly the case considering that there is no mythology around Xiwangmu being a queen.⁸³ Xiwangmu was viewed as the *yin* to her Consort Dong Wang Gong's (東王公) *yang*, arguably meaning that she had a cosmically royal function.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the

⁷⁹ Suzanne Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸¹ James, 'An iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 18.

⁸² Paul R. Goldin, 'On the Meaning of the Name Xi wangmu, Spirit-Mother of the West', *JAOS* 122 (2002).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸⁴ James, 'An iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 17. It is important to note that there is discussion surrounding *yin* and *yang* in the Han period and whether these two forces necessarily had gendered and hierarchical identities. See Raphals, *Sharing the Light*; Lee, 'Lisa Raphals, Sharing the Light'; and J.M.

common translation of *wang* as ‘king’ provides the basis for the assertion that her name, Xiwangmu, indicates queenly status. Of course, *mu* (母) also provides the basis for ‘mother’ and *xi* (西) for ‘west’. There is insufficient evidence to conclude that Xiwangmu was royal or a queen. However, even if Xiwangmu’s original nomenclature did not imply she was a queen, it is nevertheless likely she had a royal aspect for her Han Dynasty devotees. Her significance, however, lies in her stature as a spiritual and powerful deity connected to the world of ancestor worship.

Goldin highlights the use of the term *wang* when referring to deceased grandparents, *wangfu* (王符) and *wangmu* (王母).⁸⁵ Goldin refers to the Shuihudi (睡虎地) bamboo texts in his analysis, and this Qin Dynasty primary source certainly provides a basis for arguing, as Goldin, does that *wang* is an epithet used to denote a deceased family member for whom ancestor worship is appropriate.⁸⁶ The term, then, may not be an indication of royalty but of ancestral standing, and Goldin asserts that *wang* is routinely used as such in ancient formulaic language.⁸⁷

Fracasso maintains that early references to Xiwangmu, Xiwangguo or Xi Wangmu designate an ancient state to the west and to the ruler of that same state.⁸⁸ Yet Fracasso also notes Karlgren’s conclusion that Xiwangmu was not necessarily royal or a queen.⁸⁹ This conclusion is hard to accept having regard to her nomenclature and the regal overtones of Xiwangmu’s own place in the cosmic order. A possible alternative is that she was the mother of a king in the west and, thus, connected to royalty but not herself a queen. One of the *Zhushu Jinian* (竹書紀年) or *Bamboo Annals* contains a reference to a visit to Xiwangmu by a King Zhao (周昭王) who was received by her; she in return visited the king at his court.⁹⁰ Further, the *Liezi* indicates that King Mu was rather taken by Xiwangmu when he

Geaney, ‘Book Review: Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China*’, *JAOS* 120.1 (2000).

⁸⁵ Goldin, ‘Meaning of the Name Xi wangmu’, p. 84.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸⁸ Fracasso, ‘Holy Mothers of Ancient China’, p. 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 92. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics. Vol. IV: The She King*, (Hong Kong, 1872) (repr. Taipei: Southern Materials, 1983). Loewe and Legge interpret the purpose of the expedition differently.

visited and banqueted with her, and this resulted in him neglecting virtue for pleasure.⁹¹ Fracasso concludes that the early references to Xiwangmu reveal she was a sovereign living on the top of the western mountains of Kunlun.⁹²

Whether or not Xiwangmu was in fact royal, her religious importance is not in dispute. Han art reveals that Xiwangmu was treated with great reverence and regarded as having power over life and death. In a relief carving of the eastern Han period, Xiwangmu can be seen in a pavilion facing a suppliant, dressed in a headdress and with a long train to her garment.⁹³ This carving may have formed part of an offering shrine to ancestors and, thus, been part of an appeal to Xiwangmu to grant the said ancestors immortality.⁹⁴ Power over death is a vital element of most religions and the same is true for the Han, making Xiwangmu central to its canon.

Daoist deity Xiwangmu emerges

As time passed, Xiwangmu found favour within Daoist thought, eventually becoming a much-lauded female deity for Daoists. According to the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), Xiwangmu attained the *Dao* (道).⁹⁵ Fracasso holds the view that Xiwangmu's prominent position in the relevant paragraph of the *Zhuangzi* indicates that, at least for the author, Xiwangmu was important.⁹⁶ Attaining the *Dao* is a very significant achievement and explains why Xiwangmu was wholeheartedly embraced in Daoism and later Daoist veneration of Xiwangmu.⁹⁷ Thus, over time the earlier western sovereign model of Xiwangmu was subsumed by the Daoist tradition and incorporated into its canon.⁹⁸

It is also believed she had a role in determining the fate of the soul after death and had the ability to confer immortality.⁹⁹ Xiwangmu is often depicted with a mortar and pestle, which contained the elixir of immortality.¹⁰⁰ It is, then, not surprising that there are references to

⁹¹ *Liezi* 列子; A.C. Graham, trans., *The Book of Lieh-tzu*, (London, 1960), p. 64.

⁹² Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 6.

⁹³ James Watt, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin – Summer 1990* (New York, NY: The Museum of Metropolitan Art, 1990), p. 39. Item 47. Relief carving of a pavilion from Shantung Province.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ James, 'An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 18.

⁹⁶ Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 7. *Zhuangzi* 莊子; trans. in Loewe (1979), p. 89.

⁹⁷ Robson, 'The Polymorphous Space of the Southern Marchmount [Nanyue]', p. 237.

⁹⁸ Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 32.

⁹⁹ *Huainanzi* 淮南子; trans. M. Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 94. James, 'An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 19. Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 8.

¹⁰⁰ James, 'An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 20.

Xiwangmu controlling the demons of heaven.¹⁰¹ Jean James has produced an iconographical study revealing that tomb images indicate that the deceased prayed to Xiwangmu for their soul's safe passage.¹⁰² Indeed, the *Hanshu* states that an imperial edict in 6 BCE ordered that prayers be made to Xiwangmu to protect the Han from a comet.¹⁰³ It is clear that Xiwangmu, as a female deity, held the ultimate heavenly power to control life, death and natural phenomena capable of wreaking destruction. Fracasso has argued that,

Taoist [Daoist] traditions came to be predominant in Eastern and Post-Han times, when HWM [Xiwangmu] rose to the highest position of the pantheon as a queen of the immortals of the Western Paradise.¹⁰⁴

Certainly, her powers and role in Chinese mythology throughout an extended period—from the Shang into the indefinite future—are testament to the strength of Xiwangmu's deity. This is, in part, due to the way in which she appeals to the early and ongoing veneration of ancestors and elders in Chinese culture. These two aspects of her character, rather than her gender, explain the strength of her survival in devotee's minds. Furthermore, as a central deity Xiwangmu created a specific female space in later times through female Daoist cults.¹⁰⁵

There is a more sinister tradition of Xiwangmu, which Fracasso explores, in which Xiwangmu is a terrifying demon.¹⁰⁶ This, as Fracasso points out, stems from earlier Tibetan influences on religion in China.¹⁰⁷ Fortunately, this maleficent version did not find traction in Han religious discourse and result in the relegation of this powerful female deity. Rather, Xiwangmu prospered throughout the Han Dynasty, gaining a place of significance in Daoism. Importantly, this female deity with royal tint was able to provide a template for more earthly women when it came to power. Through Xiwangmu, it was clear to the Han people that women could wield great power.

¹⁰¹ In *inter alia* the *Shanhaijing jianshu* 山海經箋疏 by Hao Yixing 郝懿行 (1757–1825). Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 8. Bernhard Karlgren, 'Legends and Cults in Ancient China', *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm* 18 (1946), p. 272. Homer Dubs, 'Ancient Chinese Mystery Cult', *Harvard Theological Review* 35 (1942), p. 224.

¹⁰² James, 'An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu', p. 22.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* HS 26A/15A.

¹⁰⁴ Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Robson, 'The Polymorphous Space of the Southern Marchmount [Nanyue]', p. 237 and p. 241.

¹⁰⁶ Fracasso, 'Holy Mothers of Ancient China', p. 13, n. 28.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Chapter Two. Han Dynasty Ideology and Women

Han Dynasty women lived in and experienced a cultural context that understandably influenced their positions, behaviour and place in Han Dynasty society. This thesis focuses on what effect texts in the Han Dynasty produced when it came to women. To understand these texts and their view of women, it is necessary to examine the cultural context in respect of women. To generalise, women were the inferiors of men, frequently subject to male control and lauded for adherence to virtues that emphasised self-deprecation.¹⁰⁸ Han Dynasty ideology was informed by two main sources, religion and philosophy. These two forces were inextricably intertwined.

Han Dynasty culture was dominated by several different philosophical ideologies, including Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Huanglao (黄老). A concern that legalistic doctrine had underpinned and ultimately caused the demise of the Qin Dynasty kept that influence in check. Han philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism met with religious figures and cultural norms, such as the importance of clan structures and social norms concerning women. The Han Dynasty marked a move from the legalism of the Qin towards a reformist agenda that emphasised the moral example of the emperor.¹⁰⁹ The moral agenda of the reformists had a corresponding impact on women.

To start at the beginning, as previously discussed, the deity Xiwangmu was of central religious importance, both before and during the Han Dynasty. Having a fundamentally important female deity demonstrates that women could be considered powerful and important. What, then, did this mean for women broadly in the Han Dynasty? Han Dynasty elite culture was imbued with the standards of propriety that Confucian theory proselytised, and these moral standards became more powerful and coercive as the Han Dynasty aged. Such moral standards had a rather cooling effect on the political interactions of men and women.

In earlier times, the *Guanju* (關雎 [关雎]), a poem from the *Shijing* (詩經) or *Book of Odes*, contains expressions of sexual desire for women. Such content is shocking in the context of

¹⁰⁸ Jack Dull, trans., *Han Social Structure by T'ung-tsu Ch'ü*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 50. Note that there were exceptions according to T'ung-tsu Ch'ü – the so-called woman of 'dominating character'. See also Dull, *Han Social Structure*, p. 51. T'ung-tsu Ch'ü in such a comment has absorbed and promotes a (arguably unhelpful) view of women.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (Oxford: Routledge, 1974), preface p. 12.

the texts created in the Han Dynasty. The commentaries on the *Shijing*, however, corrected the lustful undertones of the poem. The lust of the male lover in the poem was successfully stifled under the rules of propriety by questioning whether his sexual urges would be so strong that he would even copulate before his mother or father.¹¹⁰ Riegel says this is intended to remind readers of the greater importance of ritual propriety.¹¹¹

Clearly, the passions of the flesh were not located within marriage. In a society where marriage was arranged by parents and grandparents, restricted sexual access within marriage may have benefited women. Further, the emphasis on restraining male sexual desire may be seen as benefiting women by codifying and curtailing sexual access. This then impacted not only upon the expectations a husband had of a wife, but also on how men interacted with women more broadly. This restrained approach may have inadvertently promoted the sexual safety of women. However, the safety of women was not the primary motivation of the theory; rather, social harmony was its aim.¹¹² Sexual propriety is reflected in the later texts produced in the Han Dynasty which are examined more closely throughout this thesis.

Confucianism was the overarching theoretical basis of elite Han Dynasty discourse. Confucian theory proliferated through texts purporting to be recordings of a series of conversations between Confucius and various students or colleagues. The Master's responses to the students' questions, or questions he himself posed, provided a guide for how a *junzi* (gentleman, man of moral excellence) should live and find virtue. Confucius' work was then later reviewed and influenced by the work of Mencius (Mengzi) and the mandate of heaven concept.

There is often thought to be little place for women in Confucian theory. Indeed, Confucian theory is often viewed as hostile to women.¹¹³ Generally, application of Confucian theory has been seen to place social demands on women and 'women's position was kept steadily low.'¹¹⁴ Women are not regularly mentioned in Confucian texts and there are only a few parts in the *Analects* in which they appear. The intended readers and followers of Confucius

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey Riegel, 'Eros, Introversion, and The Beginnings of *Shijing* Commentary', *HJAS* 57.1 (1997), p. 150. Wuxingpian 五行篇 interpretation circa 3rd century BCE.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 151.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 155.

¹¹³ Lin-Lee Lee, 'Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness: Ban Zhao's Lessons for Women', *Western Journal of Communication* 73.1 (2009), p. 52.

¹¹⁴ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 5.

were generally men; indeed, only elite men can live according to Confucian teachings. As Slingerland outlines,

I have exclusively used the male third person pronoun when referring to the Confucian practitioner because, as far as we can tell, the *Analects* was composed by and for men, and the idea that women might have any place in the Confucian world view—other than as temptations to immorality, or (from the Han Dynasty on) subsidiary helpmates toward morality—has no place in an account of traditional Confucianism.¹¹⁵

This succinctly outlines the androcentrism of Confucianism. Confucian theory is, at its core, a type of ancestor worship, a conservative force that contains an assumption and demands acceptance that,

all humans, male and female, operate in a highly contextual world of hierarchical relationships where behaviour is dictated by detailed codes of ritual propriety.¹¹⁶

The issue for women is that in this highly regulated space their sphere is markedly confined. Women must submit to the age and gender hierarchies it imposes.

The *Analects* makes clear that women are sources of temptation in Confucian theory. Indeed, the temptation of female beauty is one of the three things a young man must guard against.¹¹⁷ Thus Confucius states:

When he is young, and his blood and vital essence are still unstable, he guards against the temptation of female beauty.¹¹⁸

少之時，血氣未定，戒之在色

Viewing women as a distraction could be seen to benefit women by discouraging men from ‘succumbing’ to desire and visiting unwanted attentions on female counterparts. However, it also implies women are the source of temptation rather than focusing on the male characteristic of being tempted (and thus the true source). Confucianism here emphasises women’s responsibility for male behaviour. This is partially offset by Confucius’ focus on the individual gentleman’s path, in which he must control his own behaviour. Nevertheless, female beauty is a source of temptation and much focus for men.

¹¹⁵ Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius, Analects – with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), p. xii.

¹¹⁶ De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), p. 820.

¹¹⁷ *Analects* 16.7, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 145.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195. Also, Wang, *Images of Women*, pp. 64–5.

The Master said, 'I have yet to meet a man who loves Virtue as much as he loves female beauty.'¹¹⁹

子曰：吾未見好德如好色者也。

This is very similar to passage 15.13, which contains the same sentiment.¹²⁰ In that passage Confucius expressed exasperation, declaring 'I should just give up' (已矣乎).¹²¹ As Slingerland highlights, passage 9.18 above can be understood as a criticism of the pursuit of pleasure by Confucius' contemporaries. It can also be seen as an observation that if men placed as much emphasis on virtue as on female beauty, they would discard immorality and return to rectitude.¹²² It is worth noting that Sima Qian viewed the passage as the former—that is, a comment on an event during Confucius' life in which Duke Ling of Wei (衛靈公) honoured his Consort Nanzi (南子) over Confucius.¹²³ Confucius evidently found it frustrating that men had so much time for women but so little time for his teachings.

Further, the gentleman must not listen to *zheng* (鄭 [郑]), songs that are licentious and may lead to sexual impropriety.¹²⁴ Indeed Confucius provides the example of Duke Ai (哀公), who was sent six dancing girls and was so taken with them he neglected the affairs of state.¹²⁵ The entertainers were a gift from Duke Jing of Qi (齊景公 [齐景公]), who wished Confucius to come and work with him instead of Duke Ai. He hoped that when Duke Ai neglected his duties, Confucius would remonstrate with him and then leave the state. Yet despite this reprobation of dancing, it could be seen as having religious importance. Erickson has argued that dancers were communicating with deities, taking on the qualities of a goddess.¹²⁶ If so, this explains Confucius' fear. If dancing formerly provided women shamanic powers and demonstrated a veiled sexuality, then it is logical this would concern Confucius and, as a result, he promotes female sexuality as undesirable.¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ *Analects* 9.18, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 92. Also, Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 64.

¹²⁰ *Analects* 15.13, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 180.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* Alternative translation, 'It is all over!'

¹²² Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 93.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Analects* 15.11, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 179.

¹²⁵ *Analects* 18.4, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, 215. Hanfeizi annotations to cannon VI.

¹²⁶ Susan Erickson, "'Twirling their long sleeves, they dance again and again...': Jade Plaque Sleeve Dancers of the Western Han Dynasty", *Ars Orientalis* 24 (1994), p. 51 and 55. This association apparently dated back to the time of the Shang, p. 52.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The Confucian standards regarding virtue are clear in terms of separation of men and women. As always, there is room for flexibility or discretion. Mencius allows touching a woman who is not your wife to save her from danger—for example, saving a sister-in-law from drowning.¹²⁸ This indicates that the touching of man and women was generally not appropriate. Mencius' comment stands in contrast to the self-sacrifice, as opposed to the preservation of propriety, exalted by Liu Xiang in the *Lienüzhuan*.

A particularly famous and damaging passage is 17.25 of the *Analects*, which states:

The Master said, 'Women and servants are particularly hard to manage; if you are too familiar with them, they grow insolent, but if you are too distant they grow resentful'.¹²⁹

子曰：唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。

When Confucius uses the phrase *nüzi yu xiao ren* (女子與小人), it is unclear to whom he is referring, *xiao ren* is arguably in juxtaposition to the accomplished *junzi*. There are several interpretations. There is discussion about whether Confucius is referring to female servants or slaves. Jiang sees such an interpretation as departing too far from the original text and an attempt to dismiss the sexist flavour of the passage.¹³⁰ Certainly, it is hard to introduce female servants or slaves when the text arguably contains two separate groups, women and servants. In addition, as Jiang highlights, why would Confucius address the issue of servants only?¹³¹ Surely this only trivialises the text.¹³² Such an interpretation appears inconsistent with the overarching drafting of the *Analects*. Conversely, it is understandable why such an interpretation is put forward, particularly considering Jiang's comments that Confucian enthusiasts are attempting to protect the text and philosophy from being viewed as overtly sexist.

Another reading is that Confucius is, in fact, referring to the character 汝, meaning 'you', and that the phrase thus refers to the listeners' children.¹³³ This interpretation reignites the issue as to why their children would be included so specifically. Jiang views the only possible

¹²⁸ Mencius 4.A.17; James Legge, trans., *The Works of Mencius*. Robert Eno, *Mengzi. An Online Teaching Translation*, available at <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mengzi.pdf>, p. 77; accessed 23 March 2017.

¹²⁹ *Analects* 17.25, trans. Slingerland, Confucius, *Analects*, p. 211. Also, Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 66.

¹³⁰ Xinyan Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36.2 (2009), p. 230.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 231. Also Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 66.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Paul Goldin, 'The View of Women in Early Confucianism', in Chenyang Li and Peimin Ni (eds.), *The Sage and the Second Sex, Confucianism, Ethics and Gender*, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2000), p. 139.

interpretation as female children.¹³⁴ On this reading the question becomes, why are female children singled out? It is sensible to understand the text as referring to women and servants and to understand them as being grouped together as subordinates to the male Confucian readership.

Confucian texts, including the *Analects*, are full of concerns regarding female power. Slingerland highlights that this takes two forms:

1. women, like alcohol, intoxicate men and make them behave immorally; and
2. the deleterious impact of consorts on powerful husbands such as kings and princes.¹³⁵

With the second form, the state and its moral fibre are in danger from female power. It is significant that the *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳) or Zuo Commentary refers to women and their attractive power as infinite.¹³⁶ This connects female power to concepts of chaos, chaos being the thing most feared by Confucians.

Goldin also discussed the possibility that this passage dates from after Confucius' death in 270 BCE.¹³⁷ This would absolve Confucius himself from any involvement in the passage and leave the responsibility with his followers. Although this passage is consistent with Confucian views of women as irrational, its authenticity is open to academic discussion. Nevertheless, Slingerland correctly identifies it as a famously misogynous passage.¹³⁸ It demonstrates that the path of virtue is a path for men, and many in the Han Dynasty debated and doubted the ability of women to achieve virtue.¹³⁹ Conversely, Goldin identifies that the passage does not say it is impossible, merely that it is difficult.¹⁴⁰

It is hard to interpret the passage in any other way than as revealing the inferiority of women to men in Confucian thought and ancient China. In implying that women are more difficult to nourish than men, Confucius places them further from cultivation and behind men.¹⁴¹ However, it would be a mistake to take the manifold, and indeed stereotyped, images of 'long-tongued' women as an authorial attitude that can be extended indiscriminately to all

¹³⁴ Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts', p. 230.

¹³⁵ Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 212. Also, Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 66.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹³⁷ Goldin, 'The view of women in early Confucianism', p. 139.

¹³⁸ Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, commentary, p. 211.

¹³⁹ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, discusses this in Chapter 6.

¹⁴⁰ Goldin, 'The View of Women in Early Confucianism', pp. 139–40.

¹⁴¹ Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts', p. 231.

women.¹⁴² Women can demonstrate piety and filial piety. As will be seen in our discussion of Liu Xiang's canonical text, the lengths woman must go to, and the depth of piety they must display, far exceed that required of men.¹⁴³ Perhaps apparent female worthlessness results in the need for women to perform exaggerated acts to demonstrate and prove their piety.¹⁴⁴ For this reason, we see more violence, suicide, infanticide and depravity in stories regarding women and piety.¹⁴⁵ Women prove their virtue through subjugating themselves, punishing themselves and harming themselves.

There is another passage in the *Analects* that reveals a dismissive view of women:

Shun had five ministers and the world was well-governed. King Wu said, 'I have ten ministers in charge of establishing order'. The Master commented, 'It is said that talent is difficult to find—is it not the case? Virtue flourished as never before after the reigns of Yao and Shun, and yet [even among King Wu's ten ministers] there was a woman included, so he really only had nine good men.'¹⁴⁶

舜有臣五人而天下治。武王曰：「予有亂臣十人。」孔子曰：「才難，不其然乎？唐虞之際，於斯為盛。有婦人焉，九人而已。」

In this passage, again the text appears to discount women to the point that they are not the same as, equal to, or even to be counted as people along with their male counterparts. As Xinyan states, it is very difficult to view this as anything other than women having reduced status.¹⁴⁷ For Confucius to discount the female minister is odd, especially as King Wu includes her. There are no wasted words in the *Analects*. As such, Confucius introduces the little vignette for a reason. What reason can there be other than to demonstrate his view that women cannot be ministers or cannot be included in the same manner as men. If Confucius means only to highlight that there were only nine men, again the passage becomes entirely trivial and achieves no purpose. Slingerland suggests that it is merely that a woman could not be a serving minister and so is excluded by Confucius.¹⁴⁸ It may be written this way as a

¹⁴² Goldin, 'The View of Women in Early Confucianism', p. 135.

¹⁴³ Keith Knapp, *Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ The need to prove oneself and be better than male counterparts is not so foreign even to the 'modern woman'.

¹⁴⁵ Knapp, *Selfless Offspring*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ *Analects* 8.2; trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 84. Also, Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁷ Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts', p. 231.

¹⁴⁸ Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 85 commentary.

woman could not serve as a minister. If this is the case, then surely the implication from Confucius is also that this 'non-serving' female minister contributes nothing to King Wu. Chan agrees that the passage demonstrates the exclusion of women from Confucian learning and their moral inferiority.¹⁴⁹ Ultimately, while the meaning of the passage is somewhat elusive, it clearly demonstrates conflicts regarding the treatment and characterisation of women in the public sphere.

Another relevant passage of the *Analects* states the wife of a lord refers to herself as little child, while the people of the state call her our orphaned lady when she is abroad.¹⁵⁰ This passage is often seen as a later interpolation; however it was accepted by Han Dynasty scholars as part of the *Analects*.¹⁵¹ Whether original to Confucius or a later addition from another Confucian text, the nomenclature is revealing. In the first reference, the lady is reduced to the status of a child; in the other, she is depicted as orphaned due to her absence from home and, by implication, being bereft of her husband. Husbands orient the lives of their wives; as such, without a husband nearby a wife can be said to be lost.

The inferiority of women is also seen in the *Analects*' five human relationships, in which the relationship between husband and wife is likened to the relationship between ruler and subject. Mencius specified that the five human relationships were father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, older and younger, and friends and friends.¹⁵² Yet the *Analects* contain no advice on how to treat sisters and daughters. The inclusion of mother is only as parent and never equal to that of a father. Even if we ignore the passages that do refer to women and focus only on the omission of women in the content of the *Analects*, then that is clear in its communication. It is evident from the text of the *Analects* that Confucius is interested only in male morality and virtue.¹⁵³ Mencius takes the subordination of women and elaborates on what it means. For example, 'it is the way of women to take obedience as the norm'¹⁵⁴ is an explicit statement of what women should do and what their role is. This is part of a phenomenon whereby later Confucianism becomes more overtly discriminatory.

¹⁴⁹ Chan, 'Gender and Relationship Roles', p. 120.

¹⁵⁰ *Analects*, 16.14; trans., Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 198.

¹⁵¹ Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 198.

¹⁵² Mencius 3A.4. Legge, *The Works of Mencius*. Eno, Mengzi, p. 58. *Analects* 1.2, 1.6, 1.11, 2.5, 2.6 and 4.26, trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*.

¹⁵³ Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts', p. 232.

¹⁵⁴ Mencius 3B.2. Legge, *The Works of Mencius*. Eno, Mengzi, p. 64 (accessed 23 March 2017).

Undoubtedly, early Confucianism did not discriminate against women as strongly as later Confucianism did with its justification of the oppression of women.¹⁵⁵

The Confucian emphasis on hierarchy only enhanced gender distinctions. These gender distinctions operated to disadvantage women. Confucian thought became increasingly dominant as the Han Dynasty progressed. Knapp reports that while in Emperor Yuan's time (roughly 48–32 BCE) only 27 per cent of officials were Confucian scholars, by the Eastern Han Dynasty this figure had risen to almost 70 per cent.¹⁵⁶ This trend marks two phenomena: the rise of scholarship as a qualification for public service and the dominance of Confucian thought as the pinnacle of such scholarship. Under the Han Dynasty, the Liu clan was so closely associated with Confucianism that Nylan has commented that its fall from power may have led some to question the very cultural underpinnings of Confucianism.¹⁵⁷ It is no surprise, then, that during the Han Dynasty conservative Confucian views regarding women circulated.

The growth of cosmology and portent studies also affected the discourse of women later in the Han Dynasty.¹⁵⁸ Portent studies were undertaken to examine the cause of unusual natural phenomena, taken to be signs of heaven's will, and thus of great importance considering the mandate of heaven the emperor required to rule.¹⁵⁹ These portent studies grew out of Confucian theory and the concepts of *yin* and *yang*. They became a powerful ideology and were used to criticise powerful women.¹⁶⁰ Thus in 32 BCE, during the reign of Emperor Cheng, it was reported that in September of that year there were two moons visible and this indicated the emperor was dominated by female influence, *yin*.¹⁶¹ Hinsch argues that

¹⁵⁵ Jiang, 'Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts', pp. 233–4.

¹⁵⁶ Knapp, *Selfless Offspring*, p. 22.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Nylan, 'Confucian Piety and Individualism in Han China', *JAOS* 116.1 (1996), p. 23.

¹⁵⁸ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, pp. 12–3.

¹⁵⁹ Ban Gu refers of the mandate of heaven when writing of Emperor Ai's reign; *HS* 11.5b; Dubs III, p. 30. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 142, attests to increased focus on phenomena from the reign of Emperor Xuan around 48 BCE onwards.

¹⁶⁰ Bret Hinsch, 'The Criticism of Powerful Women by Western Han Dynasty Portent Experts', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49.1, (2006), p. 98. Confucian theory was interconnected with other elements of Chinese thought: the five phases (*wuxing*) of wood, earth, fire, metal and water were the essential elements dominating time and space. This was part of *yin* (broken, fluid, passive, female) and *yang* (solid, unbroken, active, male) theory, which outlines how seemingly opposite forces give life to one another.

¹⁶¹ *HS* 10.3a; Dubs II, p. 378. These two moons conveniently demonstrate what Ban Gu wishes to communicate: that Emperor Cheng was controlled by his love of women and the Zhao sisters, to the detriment of his reign.

cosmology essentialised gender, having an unequal effect on how women were viewed in elite discourse, and that

as time went on, portent experts raised the female role in the cosmos, blaming powerful women whom they disliked for an increasingly wide range of natural disasters.¹⁶²

This inevitably limited the political influence of women. Confucian theory and elite discourse were not the ultimate cultural dictate of Han Dynasty society. For most of the Han Dynasty population, Confucian theory and intellectual debates had little effect on their lives. Even for leading members of society, as Hinsch points out, ‘Confucian classics are very useful documents, but they are not definitive portrayals of early gender relations.’¹⁶³ Philosophical works are rarely representative of existing reality. They are idealistic. Nevertheless, when ideals are taken to heart and valued as Confucianism was in elite Han Dynasty society, the impact can be significant.

In contradiction to the *Analects*’ view of women, female status and power were arguably enhanced by the core Confucian virtue of filial piety. The duty of respect and, in many ways, subservience to parents gave mothers added strength, especially where a father was absent. This perfectly describes the situation of a Han Dynasty emperor. Their accession was dependent upon paternal death. The emperor was thus most often left with only an older female relative, generally his mother. The duty of obedience to parents meant an imperial mother in the Han Dynasty could wield particular power over and through her son.¹⁶⁴ An apt example of maternal influence is when Empress Dowager Bo was the only one able to dissuade her son, Emperor Wen (孝文皇帝, r. 180–157 BCE), from personally leading a military attack on the Xiongnu.¹⁶⁵ This was despite remonstrances from many of his officials.¹⁶⁶ Mothers legitimately exerted ultimate influence personally, and thus politically.

¹⁶² Hinsch, ‘Portent Experts’, p. 112.

¹⁶³ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 4. Hinsch has explored the divergence of Confucian ideals and reality in his article ‘Women, Kinship and Property as seen in a Han Dynasty Will’, *TP*, 2nd ser., 84.1/3 (1998), pp. 1–20. In this article, he discusses the major role of a mother in writing her son’s will. Furthermore, this mother had attracted husbands to join her household, not the other way around as would be expected.

¹⁶⁴ Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 120. Excerpt of *Hanfeizi* trans. Burton Watson.

¹⁶⁵ The Xiongnu are, to the Chinese, essentially ‘Barbarians’, external non-Chinese populations in Central Asia. The Han State was, especially in its infancy, engaged in battle with them and made diplomatic overtures to the Xiongnu for their security.

¹⁶⁶ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 301; Nienhauser II, p. 172.

This influence was increased by the way in which Confucian thought evolved to enable women to instruct their husbands or sons.¹⁶⁷

Elite discourse is always somewhat divorced from the political reality. The approach of Confucian theory to women and their role was complex and evolving. Confucian theory codified the roles women held and the ways in which women could act. If women acted within the hierarchy and according to Confucian ideals, they could earn recognition and, at times, elevate their male counterparts through their behaviour.¹⁶⁸ This had political implications within the imperial family. The Confucian view of appropriate female positions in the social hierarchy and other arenas did not erase the fact that women were integral to the system of imperial rule and were components of the machinery of its government.

It is no secret that Confucian thinking continues to influence Chinese culture. A vital feature of Confucianism is that every person is part of a hierarchy. Each person is defined by their place in that hierarchy and their relationships within the family and the wider clan. Notions of individuality and equality, so central to modern western philosophy, are foreign and unfamiliar concepts. Marriage in the Confucian worldview is the unification of two families and the realignment of hierarchies for those involved.¹⁶⁹ Thus, mistreatment of a wife by a husband had wider familial implications that provided significant disincentives to familial violence.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Confucianism is often seen as subjugating the individual. The path of righteousness is a moderation espoused by Confucianism that, in turn, assisted people lower down the hierarchy.¹⁷¹ It is true that, to this day, 'simply reducing Confucianism to a misogynist philosophy misses the complexity of Han Chinese culture'.¹⁷² Chan argues that concepts of gender are not integral parts of core Confucian philosophy.¹⁷³ Instead, it is the interpretation of Confucian theory that makes gender constructs integral to Confucianism.

Although Confucianism was of supreme importance to Han Dynasty thought, it was not the only cultural force. Daoism, with its complex and mystical school of philosophy and religion, predated Confucianism and remained influential in the Han Dynasty. Daoism was

¹⁶⁷ M. Chiu, 'Contextualising the Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in Hong Kong', *China: An International Journal* 2.1. (2004), p. 103. This is exactly what Liu Xiang does in the *Lienüzhuan*.

¹⁶⁸ Goldin, 'The view of women in early Confucianism', pp. 137 and 141.

¹⁶⁹ Chiu, 'Sexual Violence', p. 102.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁷³ Chan, 'Gender and Relationship Roles', p. 127.

underscored with remembrance of a time before chaos and confusion (when Confucianism arguably emerged) to a time when tradition, innocence and complete simplicity existed. The Daoist scholar is the individual alone with his own thoughts, as opposed to the Confucian gentleman who is caught in a web of binding social relationships. Daoism is thus often viewed as the opposite of Confucianism because of its departure from social responsibility and focus on the life of the recluse. Yet Daoism can be both the opposite of and still complementary to Confucianism.¹⁷⁴

The fundamental scripture of Daoism, the *Daodejing* (道德經)—*The Way and Its Virtue*, traditionally ascribed to Laozi (老子) and sometimes known by his name—is a work of poetry containing a mixture of wit, paradox and mysticism.¹⁷⁵ The *Dao*, or the Way, is not amenable to description; in fact, according to Daoism, if it were discernible then it would not be the Way. Despite the difficulty of penetrating Daoism, some values are clear; patience, passivity, being humble, quietude, being free from desire and strife. At the centre of Daoism is the art of *wu wei* (無為), usually translated as ‘non-action’, which requires yielding to the universe. This had a profound impact on the style of imperial leadership, resulting in emperors who were renowned for a lack of interference.¹⁷⁶ This is in marked opposition to the striking personal achievements of Emperor Gaozu (劉邦 [刘邦]) (r. 206–195 BCE)¹⁷⁷ and Qin Emperor Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) (r. 220–210 BCE).¹⁷⁸

Loewe has asserted that a review of the historical sources reveals that that it,

was rare for an emperor to exert significant influence on the fact of a dynasty, the strength of government or public life.¹⁷⁹

This lack of influence was likely due to a combination of:

1. the focus in Daoism on non-action;
2. the upheaval caused by those rulers who did stand apart in terms of personal achievements (Wang Mang (王莽) being a notable later example);

¹⁷⁴ William Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 50. De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), p. 77.

¹⁷⁵ De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960), p. 50.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Loewe, ‘The Cosmological Context of Sovereignty in Han Times’, *BSOAS* 65.2 (2002), p. 345.

¹⁷⁷ Also known as Han Gaozu (漢高祖).

¹⁷⁸ Loewe, ‘The Cosmological Context of Sovereignty in Han Times’, p. 345.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

3. the importance of the bureaucratic classes;
4. the slow effect of centralised government in Han Dynasty China; and
5. and the emphasis on cosmological forces that continued to permeate Han Dynasty thought.

Did this restrictive force operate universally? Or is this ideology so deeply entrenched in the historical sources that they unconsciously conceal personal achievements of those who rule, unless the results were disastrous?¹⁸⁰

Women were active participants in Daoist religious practices and the religious hierarchy. This was tempered by the reality that, in Chinese culture at the time, women were characterised as submissive.¹⁸¹ As has been seen in the exploration above, Daoist religion did incorporate Xiwangmu as a very important deity. Further, Nüwa/Nügua, as a symbol of *yin*, binds with the symbol of heaven (*yang*) to give order to heaven.¹⁸²

Daoist religion and its temples also enabled socially excluded women (and women more broadly) to seek refuge by joining the religious order.¹⁸³ Women participated in Daoism at an everyday level and were also part of its philosophical basis. There are several ways of interpreting how women were conceived of or presented in Daoism. Daoism can be seen as benefiting women because it emphasises the ‘importance of *yin*, of softness, of non-action.’¹⁸⁴ Laozi spent much time emphasising the characteristics of *yin* as positives. Yet since women are conceptualised as part of cosmology’s *yin* and *yang*, women can equally be impure and moveable.¹⁸⁵ Women were thought to be better able to understand *Dao* or the Way because of their child-bearing ability.¹⁸⁶ *Yin* and *yang* had traditionally been viewed as complementary but different elements; however increasingly this became a relationship of unequal elements.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 346. Loewe suggests the former.

¹⁸¹ Catherine Despeux, ‘Women in Daoism’, in L. Kohn (ed.), *Daoism Handbook*, Handbook of Oriental Studies / Handbuch der Orientalistik – Part 4: China, 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 385.

¹⁸² R. Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012), p. 103.

¹⁸³ Despeux, ‘Women in Daoism’, p. 386.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 401.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 402

¹⁸⁷ Chan, ‘Gender and Relationship Roles’, p. 116.

Another relevant philosophy for the Han Dynasty was Huanglao, which preached that the ruler must model himself on heaven, by understanding the order of nature and the *Dao*, to acquire true authority for the exercise of his power.¹⁸⁸ Huanglao thought received the favour of Empress Dou (竇皇后), but her death in 135 BCE marked the decline of this branch of Daoism.¹⁸⁹ With the Empress Dowager's death and the growth of Confucian theory and various expansionist policies, which were incompatible with the passive and peaceful beliefs of Daoism, Huanglao thought diminished in importance.¹⁹⁰ From this time (135 BCE) onwards, 'it was becoming exceptional rather than normal for a Han Emperor to take an active or decisive part in government'.¹⁹¹ An emperor might find himself as a central motif of a complex and intricate pattern over which he in fact had no or very little control.

Indeed, only in a few rare instances can it be shown that a Han emperor was personally responsible for initiating policies or guiding the destinies of the dynasty.¹⁹²

The place of women in the Han Dynasty is not solely revealed in philosophical works. Previously, an emphasis on a male heir undertaking filial piety and its related duties resulted in a belief that a male heir was necessary. This underpinned practices such as concubinage or the taking of a second wife.¹⁹³ An exploration of the practices of adoption in the Han Dynasty reveals that the approach to inheritance, marriage and adoption did not support such an absolute position. Brown and de Crespigny cite the statutes in the *Zouyan shu* (奏讞書 [奏讞书]) or *Book of Doubtful Cases* from Zhangjiashan (張家山 [张家山]):

The old statutes observe: in cases in which the husband of a family (?) has died, his son will become his heir; if there is no son, then use his father and mother; if there is no father and mother, then use his wife; if there is no wife, then use his daughter.¹⁹⁴

故律曰死夫(?) 以男為後。毋男以父母，毋父母以妻，毋妻以子女為後。

While this clearly reaffirms the familial hierarchy of the Han Dynasty it also makes no mention of any disastrous outcome if there is no son; succession merely continues in

¹⁸⁸ Michael Loewe, *Faith, Myth and Reason in Han China* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 2005), p. 149.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 182. See also Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 60.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁹² Loewe, 'Former Han Dynasty', p. 179.

¹⁹³ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 2–4.

¹⁹⁴ Brown and de Crespigny, 'Adoption in Han China', p. 238.

accordance with the customary line. It also reminds us of the secondary position women held in any line of succession. The manipulation of this accepted hierarchy was attempted by Emperor Ping (平帝) (r. 1 BCE–6 CE) when, to diminish the power of the Wang consort family, he authorised grandsons and fraternal nephews to serve as heirs of kings.¹⁹⁵ Certainly, the imperial succession did not necessarily follow the traditional example of son succeeding father.¹⁹⁶

Han Dynasty culture, as reflective of earlier Qin and Warring States cultural underpinnings focussed importance on the hierarchy and virtue. This had ramifications for every member of the Han Dynasty and in particularly inter familial relations. Such culture was in many ways restrictive to women. Nevertheless, family in part determined the leadership of the dynasty, women as integral components of that family setting were vital to the existence of the leadership and were in position to enable succession.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. *HS* 12.2b; Dubs III, p. 65.

¹⁹⁶ Brown and de Crespigny, 'Adoption in Han China', p. 238.

Chapter Three. The Family as the Political Unit

Han China was an imperial monarchy. Individual male leaders supposedly held ultimate political power. There are two core features that explain why female political power existed as it did; the importance of the family as a political unit, and the type of governmental system (monarchy). The two are intertwined, as monarchy necessarily elevated the family. Thus far, we have seen that women were powerful in mythology and that the Han Dynasty cultural context was conservative in its approach to women. Nevertheless, as this thesis will demonstrate, women were powerful. This was predominantly due to the importance of the family unit in politics: families held power and large families could maintain that power. Without women, families did not exist.

As Loewe attests, the development of Han Dynasty politics must be ‘understood in the context of the rivalries and scandals within the palace’.¹⁹⁷ Further, ‘imperial consorts and their families were involved in the dynastic and political destinies of the Han Dynasty’.¹⁹⁸ This was a matter of necessity, as succession based on parentage inevitably involved mothers who were female members of the imperial court. It could be said that female empowerment was derived from male relatives’ weakness.¹⁹⁹

It was a man’s position in a familial structure that enabled him to become emperor in the Han Dynasty. Similarly, it was often a blood relationship to the emperor that enabled women to gain and exercise power. Just as an empress could be nominated to their position, they could also be removed by their emperor’s personal decree.²⁰⁰ The early imperial evolution sees the family unit as an emotional community wherein relations and hierarchy are determined by emotional proximity.²⁰¹ This benefited mothers, as they could cultivate deep personal connections of interdependency with their offspring. Despite women being ‘ritual adjuncts’ of their husbands when it came to lineage, within the household their influence was substantial, particularly over their sons.²⁰² This power was often identified as occurring within the inner court, as opposed to the officials and bureaucrats of the outer court. The

¹⁹⁷ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 114.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁹⁹ McMahon, ‘Women Rulers’, p. 187 and 201.

²⁰⁰ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 49.

²⁰¹ Mark Edward Lewis, ‘Mothers and Sons in Early Imperial China’, *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident, hors-série* (2012), p. 245.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

challenge for any examination of Han Dynasty history is that it was never members of the imperial family who wrote history. Rather, the men who inhabited the outer court were the authors who provided the texts that have survived the ages. It is for this reason that women are often viewed as having no political status. T'ung-tsu Ch-u stated:

Women did not usually have a status in the political mechanism; however, some had influence in politics because of the political status of their husbands.²⁰³

This is a simplification that overlooks the significant role many of the more senior women of the imperial court played. The monarchical model of government meant female involvement was necessary. However, our authors, as members of the outer court and from official families, wished to reduce the power of the inner court members to the benefit of their own families. As is frequently the case, status, rather than gender is generally the predominant determinant of power,²⁰⁴ the reasoning being that this benefits the incumbent holders of power.

Indeed, almost everything about an individual's life in early imperial China was defined by familial and kinship relationships.²⁰⁵ Hinsch has identified the effect that filial piety and kinship networks had on men and women in China. Adulthood was not marked by separation and independence from parents. Rather, adulthood meant the deference due to father and mother (or in-laws for women) was continued.²⁰⁶ Just as men with living parents were perpetual children in the family unit, women were almost never without family members to curtail their autonomy (be it son, brother, uncle or father-in-law).

While the family gave men political power and opportunities, it did the same for women. It is significant that both genders sourced their political power from the family. Women's memberships of specific families, particularly the imperial family, translated to access and involvement in the political process, allowing expression of female political power. The reality is that imperial women had more influence in a political system focused on the family than they would have enjoyed in a system that involved non-familial political power structures.

²⁰³ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 57; see also p. 58, T'ung-tsu Ch'u does discuss the elevated status of princesses and how this reversed the usual marriage hierarchy.

²⁰⁴ This is something T'ung-tsu Ch'ü discusses. See Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 59.

²⁰⁵ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 7.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

A monarchy centres on the family in political terms. As such, women often have real political importance as the conduit for continuance of bloodlines. This is not to suggest that women's power depended solely on their child-bearing ability. Yet production of an heir could be important in securing women the position of empress. Dynastic stability could be furthered by nomination of an empress and her son as heir apparent.²⁰⁷ Emperor Jing (漢景帝) (r. 157–141 BCE) made Lady Wang, his second wife, Empress Wang of Jing (孝景王皇后) (r. 150–141 BCE) and simultaneously made her son the heir apparent.²⁰⁸ Bearing imperial children was an important influence on imperial marriages and female power. Female imperial status was arguably increased because women were not seen as rivals for the throne, unlike male peers. Despite the importance of women as child-bearers, it is too simplistic to attribute all female power to child production. The multiple women with whom an Emperor could produce children meant a consort brought other elements to her marriage—familial ties, money, power and, as we will see in Liu Xiang's text, virtue.

The Qin Dynasty and the preceding warring states were all monarchies. With a centralised imperial court in the Han Dynasty, women were now close to and in regular contact with their families, meaning they had powerful male relatives near them. This enabled families to consolidate and increase their power. Prior to unification, interstate elite marriage was quite common and this inhibited female solidification of power. These women were often isolated and unable to elevate male family members. Further, upon their marriage they were expected to conform to the practices of their husband's household. Kinney has stated that the centralised empire's practice of sending the male ruler's relatives away from the capital also created a power vacuum, which consort families filled.²⁰⁹ Certainly, male relatives of the emperor were often sent out from the capital as princes, leaving the emperor frequently in the company of his mother's family, and later in the company of his wife's family.

The relative stability of this new centralised government, compared to the periods of warfare preceding it, probably did mean a reassertion of female political power. Warfare was, at this time, a male activity. Monarchy had been the system during the Qin Dynasty and earlier, during the Warring States period, and it was the Chinese norm. With a unified Chinese empire, female power also had a much larger scope than under the separate state system.

²⁰⁷ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 50.

²⁰⁸ *SJ* 11; Watson I, p. 314; Nienhauser II, p. 203. Empress Wei was another consort who had started out as a dancing girl.

²⁰⁹ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. xviii.

Powerful families more readily emerged through female assistance. This was also in no small part due to the importance of Empress Lü (de facto reign 206–180 BCE). By ruling as de facto emperor after her husband's death in 195 BCE, she provided the template that gave later imperial women more political power. Female access to power was not direct, however, as they were often excluded from court political processes. Increasingly, Han officials and the bureaucracy within which they operated, in addition to the emperor and his family, would make the political decisions. Decision-making was traditionally undertaken within the imperial court and often familial or bureaucratic.

Imperial women were wealthy and had direct access to the emperor; they had control over land and, thus, tenants and resources. Indeed, as Swann has highlighted, many Han Dynasty women outside the imperial court held great wealth on their own account. Ban Gu, in his *Hanshu*, includes a passage regarding the Widow Qing of Ba (巴寡婦清). She had inherited mines of cinnabar and had accumulated great wealth. Ban Gu tells us that the Widow of Ba was invited by the first emperor to the imperial palace and a pavilion erected in her honour.²¹⁰ Sima Qian mentions the Widow of Ba only briefly, stating that her good name became illustrious throughout the empire.²¹¹

Han Imperial women could and did manoeuvre people into politically powerful offices, even kingships, meaning many in important official posts owed their success to women. The Empress (later Dowager) Dou, wife of Emperor Wen, bestowed lands upon her brother and three male members of the Dou clan were made marquises.²¹² Such an example is representative of Han Dynasty practice. Han Dynasty imperial women were quite active patrons; the giving of positions (including titles) or land rights was a vital way of establishing favours and relationships of reciprocity which woman could use to their advantage. Empress Lü, particularly after her husband's death, placed her family members in key military, civil and political positions to ensure her own power.²¹³ Family members filled official positions and bolstered the clan's power base to secure its future. Powerful families were also sizeable, with large numbers of direct relatives and associated slaves and supporters often living

²¹⁰ *HS* 91. Discussed by Nancy Lee Swann, 'A Woman among the Rich Merchants: The Widow of PA 巴寡婦清 (3rd Century B.C.)', *JAOS* 54.2 (1934), p. 192.

²¹¹ *SJ* 129; Watson II, p. 440.

²¹² *SJ* 49; Watson I, pp. 328–9.

²¹³ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273, Nienhauser II, p. 116. *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 323 onwards. *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, pp. 191–2.

together on large estates.²¹⁴ This meant such families had the resources and scale necessary to fill multiple official positions at court, thereby increasing the family's power. A large family was particularly beneficial to a consort to the emperor.

In view of this it, is not surprising that kinship was a necessary ingredient of lasting and consolidated power. If kin relationships did not exist, or were removed, there were only two options for consort kin: create a new kinship tie to cement the family's or their own position or accept the reduction in their powerbase.

When Emperor Hui (漢惠帝) (r. 195–188 BCE) died, Empress Lü was left without an heir of her own blood. This caused anxiety to the Lü clan, as their power base was dependent on a Lü-connected emperor. The solution was to adopt a suitably young and malleable emperor and, via that adoption, recreate the kinship relationship. As Hinsch highlights, this made the new emperor the nephew of Empress Lü's brothers.²¹⁵ As uncles, they could exert legitimate, ongoing and weighty influence on the young emperor. Adoption created powerful filial bonds when no bloodline option remained. The family hierarchy could be used effectively to control the emperor and, thus, the dynasty. In contrast, Wei Qing (衛青), who had been brother-in-law to Emperor Wu (武帝) (r. 141–87 BCE), experienced a sudden loss of power when his half-sister, Empress Wei Zifu (衛子夫) and her son, the heir apparent Liu Ju (劉據), committed suicide.²¹⁶ Without either his sister or his nephew, there were no avenues to influence the throne available to Wei Qing.

As demonstrated by Empress Lü, an empress dowager, by virtue of her marriage to the previous emperor and her title, could still negotiate a future in which she held prime position despite not being the biological mother of the new emperor. Male consort kin could be numerous and, through the other advantages their gender enabled them in Han society, wield arguably more power than women. However, male consort kin could run out of options without a male emperor to exert influence over and an empress dowager was well placed to remedy the lack of a controllable male heir. When Emperor He (漢和帝) (r. 88–105 CE) died

²¹⁴ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 207–8.

²¹⁵ Bret Hinsch, 'The Origins of Han-Dynasty Consort Kin Power', *East Asian History* 25/26 June/December (2003), p. 4.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Note that Empress Wei and the Heir Apparent Liu Ju directed affairs of state in the absence of Emperor Wu, demonstrating their power.

childless, his widow Empress Dowager Deng (鄧綏)²¹⁷ was well placed (and better placed than her male relatives) to take charge. As Hinsch argues, without a young male emperor to rule over there was little for the brother of Empress Dowager Deng to do.²¹⁸ The Empress Dowager chose from the heirs who were available—who were all born of women other than herself. Emperor An (安帝) (r. 106-125 CE) emerged and was outside of the control of the Empress Dowager's relatives, leaving the Empress Dowager to take increased control. The Empress Dowager was, according to Hinsch, unrivalled.²¹⁹

In the Han Dynasty monarchical setting, political power was sought by a whole set of high-ranking families whose existence was orientated around the imperial court. In this setting, individuals had competing interests and, as such, reliance on a familial bond would generally unite the interests of those members. The very strict kinship structures of the Han Dynasty, which included age and gender hierarchies, made the Han Dynasty family unit potentially less fractious than other imperial examples. The emphasis on subordinating one's interests to those of older family members, reinforced in Confucian thought, ensured older family members could generally control younger members.

It should come as no surprise, then, that having a large family that could effectively fill all the high and elevated offices of government was advantageous. A large family meant that many individuals could step up to fill the place of any family member who died or was otherwise removed from an office. Through marriage, their kinship tentacles could be spread far and wide throughout the elite of the Han Dynasty. Empress Wang, consort of Emperor Yuan, had eight brothers and thus her son, Emperor Cheng, had eight uncles to contend with.²²⁰ The Emperor Cheng was, unsurprisingly, subject to a series of regencies by these uncles.

The maternal family of an emperor was at an immediate advantage over any competing familial claims. In general, the paternal family of the emperor would, by virtue of how succession manifested itself, be politically impotent. The emperor's father must have died for the new emperor to accede. To rule, an emperor's father needed to be selected above

²¹⁷ Deng Sui 鄧綏.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Consider, for example, the case of the Woodville family in England; once Elizabeth Woodville married King Edward IV, her brothers and sisters took up all the best positions and advantageous marriages.

other possible heirs, who were frequently born of multiple different mothers. There were likely too many siblings, often with competing agendas, for close filial relations between sons of the emperor. The elevation of the heir apparent above other sons would also have undermined any filial duties of a younger half-brother to an elder half-brother. The new emperor may have paternal uncles who were half-brothers to the old emperor and who had long been sidelined by their grandfather's choice of heir. This must have strained and convoluted any potential role paternal uncles or other family members could have played. Thus, those sons of an emperor not selected as heir apparent would likely not wield significant influence over the new emperor, even if they were older brothers. This gap, which was a necessary result of the imperial succession, left the field wide open for maternal families and consort families to fill.

In Han Dynasty China, the imperial court was controlled and governed by the niceties of polite ritualistic custom. Such custom might have restricted the physical access of women to the emperor and, thus, political power. This restriction was somewhat obviated by the ability of female relatives to use what might be termed a right of admittance to an emperor.²²¹ Sisters, mothers, wives and—perhaps—daughters or aunts might use this admission. High-ranking concubines (such as the Beautiful Companion) had a similar right of access to the emperor. This access meant that women had the potential at least to politically influence the emperor. Dettenhofer has argued that in the Han Dynasty emperors were isolated by court custom, saying that

in practice because of his seclusion, the Son of Heaven depended almost entirely on his eunuchs—and on the kinsmen of the empress or more usually those of the regent dowager empress.²²²

The emperor's isolation arguably elevated the importance of imperial women (and court eunuchs).²²³ These two groups could be sources of information, gossip and advice when the choice of companions might be relatively narrow. Women might have had good contact with the emperor in the Han Dynasty but have no political input. What we have, then, is a

²²¹ For more detail see L. S. Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', *HJAS* 23 (1960–1961). The same is true in Rome. Suetonius, *Claudius*, 26. Here, Suetonius states that Agrippina Minor 'took advantage of a relative's right to give kisses and opportunities for flattery'. Disregarding the seduction allegations against Agrippina, it confirms that Imperial relatives had special access and communication.

²²² Maria H. Dettenhofer, 'Eunuchs, Women and Imperial Courts', in Walter Scheidel (ed.), *Rome and China Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 88.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

combination of female access to male leaders and the expectation that women will have political power and opinions to share with the emperor. This is, in part, because of the respect accorded to the position of mothers. In fact, it has been argued that in Han China there were three main ways in which elite imperial women exerted power over and through men and women:

1. the psychological advantage of women as emperors' mothers or grandmothers;
2. mothers' ability to control the marriages of male (and female) descendants; and
3. a woman's ability to place male kin in key military and political posts.²²⁴

These are in addition to a woman's ability to rule as virtual regent for her young son or stepson. An imperial system in which accession was determined by paternal death strengthened and accentuated female political power, as it depended on a void of male power.²²⁵

It was the role of mother—biological or otherwise—that enabled most female power, even though according to ancient tradition the role of mother was less significant than that of father. Chun recounts how Shiga Shūzō, the Japanese historian stated:

[T]he woman's reproductive capacity, namely that of the 'womb' (*pao*), insofar as the nature of the life of one's descendants is concerned, has no significance whatsoever. That life can be perpetuated and extended by the male *ch'i* is a most distinctive feature of the Chinese work ethos.²²⁶

It was thus paternity, not maternity, that bound siblings,²²⁷ to such a degree that brothers by the same mother were only later, after the Han Dynasty, considered to share kinship ties.²²⁸ The move toward recognition of kinship for half-brothers born of different fathers but of the same mother emerged as time progressed.²²⁹ This move correlated to an amendment to the

²²⁴ Outlined by Jennifer Holmgren, 'Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming', in R.S. Watson, & P. Buckley Ebrey (eds.), *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

²²⁵ It is thus not surprising that women who became the focus of early Confucian myths of womanhood were empress dowagers and widows. With the death of their husbands they were forced to take on additional duties and obligations in promoting their children's interests. Susan Mann 'Presidential Address: Myths of Asian Women' *JAS* 59.4 (November 2000), p. 842.

²²⁶ Allen C. Chun, 'Conceptions of Kinship and Kingship in Classical Chou China', *TP*, 2nd ser., 76.1–3 (1990), pp. 16–48.

²²⁷ Chun, 'Kinship and Kingship in Chou China', p. 20.

²²⁸ Lewis, 'Mothers and Sons', p. 267. Even then their kinship relationship was up for debate.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

period of mourning for mothers regardless of their relationship to the son's father (divorced, concubine or other), whereas earlier the mourning period for a mother was determined by her relationship to the father.²³⁰ As the Han Dynasty progressed and then ended,

the re-articulation of mother-son ties in terms of emotional intensity was part of a broader reworking of the public space in early imperial China through the elaboration of personal links and networks based on feeling and shared character.²³¹

It is not only the lives of imperial women, however, that reveal how Han ideology affected Imperial women. Wider gender analysis enables a deeper understanding. Han China was a structured and codified civil society; the implementation of law was a central feature of this. Goldin has examined the increasing influence of Confucianism on law.²³² Relevant to women was the Qin approach, in which wives were responsible for a husband's misdeed, and by reporting the same could avoid punishment.²³³ It was for this reason alone that the Qin dynasty was particularly interested in registration of marriages. Without accurate records of marriages, it would have been impossible to ensure all those responsible for a crime were punished.²³⁴ Having said that, the power of the family patriarch was all but absolute, excluding only truly wanton killing of wife or child. Goldin posits this was because the state was concerned only with the obligations of citizens to the state and depriving the state of labour via wanton killing was problematic.²³⁵

Charles Sanft has examined law in Han China and his discussions are relevant to the female sphere. Sanft argues that the purpose of Han criminal law and its corresponding register of punishments was deterrence.²³⁶ Punishment was intended to send a broader message to the community. This meant it was necessary that appropriate punishment be *seen* to be implemented, more so than actual justice.²³⁷ Sanft gives the example of Wang Linqing (王林卿), a member of the powerful Wang clan during the reign of Emperor Cheng. Wang

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 267.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 271.

²³² P.R. Goldin, 'Han Law and the Regulation of Interpersonal Relations: "The Confucianization of the Law" Revisited', *AM*, Third Series, 25.1 (2012), pp. 1–31.

²³³ Ibid., p. 12.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

²³⁶ Charles Sanft, 'Law and Communication in Qin and Western Han China', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53.5 (2010), p. 682.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 684.

Linqing killed a man who was having an affair with one of his maids. The relevant local official did not punish Linqing; instead, he punished and killed one of Linqing's slaves and insisted Linqing himself had been killed. Here the communication (or myth) that punishment had been implemented was more important than the substance of what had occurred.²³⁸ It is also significant that the price of the message of deterrence was paid by a more inferior subject, a slave, reminding us that many Han Dynasty women were in a vulnerable position relative to men. The incident also clearly demonstrates that appearances were very important to Han Dynasty society, and that power was power, and the law did not apply to all.

Despite this, not all-powerful individuals could avoid punishments. Ban Gu recounts that Consort Feng Yuan (馮媛) was forced to commit suicide in 6 BCE and many of the populace thought her punishment unfair.²³⁹ Imperial politics was a dangerous game for all participants, male or female. That was particularly so when allegations of witchcraft or practising magic could be made against women. Sanft refers to the crime of a stepson abusing his father's widow.²⁴⁰ This was a crime so terrible that there was no precedent to follow in terms of punishment.²⁴¹ The location of a woman within the hierarchy was important. A woman subject to imperial court politics could be left vulnerable or, equally, powerful depending on the power balance. A widow would find a sympathetic hearing and a maid might be sacrificed. There is the example of Yang Qiu (陽球) who, when his mother was insulted, arranged the killing of the offender and his entire family.²⁴² This action was rewarded with praise for his filial piety and he then received an official posting. Mothers can be understood as a different subgroup within the broad concept of woman.

Given the Confucian focus on age and hierarchy, it is hardly surprising that mothers, like fathers, could wield significant power over their children and demand deference. Women would, of course, need to assume their defined role within the Confucian ideology to ensure lasting power and influence.²⁴³ Yang has argued that Confucian theory resulted in the

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 686. Sanft refers to her as Empress but she remained a consort. *HS* 77.3261.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 685.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 37. *HHS* 77.2498.

²⁴³ Miranda Brown, 'Sons and Mothers in Warring States and Han China, 453 BCE–220 CE', *Nan Nü*. 5.2 (2003), p. 138.

elevation of the mother as a venerated figure.²⁴⁴ As our discussion of Confucian theory prior to the Han Dynasty shows, there was little place for women or mothers in Confucian thought. Rather, in the Han Dynasty mothers take on an even more important role via the use of Confucian theory by Han Dynasty contemporaries. Han Dynasty society believed that deference was owed to parents. Good behaviour from a parent could elicit guilt from a child and, thus, a correction in behaviour. It is not surprising, then, that the parent with whom there was a closer relationship would demand more love and respect.²⁴⁵

Indeed, the figure of the mother held an increasingly enhanced position in Han Dynasty mourning practices, which can shed light on the place of mother in Han Chinese thinking. Brown outlines that research into mourning has revealed a higher number of references to men mourning mothers than mourning fathers.²⁴⁶ Indeed, not only did Eastern Han accounts of sons mourning mothers outnumber those of fathers, but they also tended to be richer and more poignant.²⁴⁷ Funerary inscriptions from 150 CE onward demonstrate the extremely close relationship of mother and son. Lewis states this marks a change from the Western Han, during which the greatest expression of filial piety was not personal but one's devotion to the ruler.²⁴⁸ While we cannot know the feelings of the mourners, as the inscriptions were composed by authors, it is very interesting that personal displays of intense emotion in mourning of mothers (and small children) were made public.²⁴⁹ This demonstrates cultural approval of the practice of elevating the importance of mothers in the lives of their sons. Men who demonstrated piety were more likely to be selected for official positions, as such there was further incentive to increase a man's filial devotion to his mother. This had a corresponding effect on the status of some women.

Brown gives numerous examples of sons who were devastated by the death of their mother, such as Cai Yong's (蔡邕) account of a death of a mother in the Cui 崔 family and the example of Hu Hao (胡颢), who commissioned a eulogist to write a tribute to be publicly erected.²⁵⁰ These all raise the question of why, suddenly, the place of these men's mothers

²⁴⁴ Shanshan Yang. 'Women in Transition: Ban Zhao and Gender Issues.' Dissertation: Californian Institute of Integral Studies. *ProQuest* (2015), p. 57.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55 discusses the guilt of the four stepchildren of Cheng Wenju (程文矩). *HHS* 2794.

²⁴⁶ Brown, 'Sons and Mothers', p. 139.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁴⁸ Lewis, 'Mothers and Sons', p. 256.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

²⁵⁰ Brown, 'Sons and Mothers', pp. 156–9.

was elevated. Brown offers a possible explanation, that ‘public expressions of grief over dead mothers became important for defining a man’s public persona’.²⁵¹ While fathers had traditionally taken precedence over mothers in terms of the period and practices of mourning and,²⁵² as the Han Dynasty progressed mothers increasingly took precedence as the relationship between mother and son changed. The relationship between father and son had formerly been the closest. By the end of the Western Han Dynasty in 25 CE, however, that bond had become one of veneration but not closeness.²⁵³ It was this change in closeness that elevated the position of mothers. As time passed and the eastern Han became the northern and southern dynasties, there was a substantial re-interpretation of mourning obligations as they pertained to mothers.²⁵⁴ When it was suggested in 268 CE that Emperor Wu cut short his mourning for his mother, he was outraged²⁵⁵

Brown has argued that because consort clans grew in power and imperial power became increasingly dependent on consort ties, the mother–son relationship became elevated in elite thinking.²⁵⁶ A father would, by nature of filial piety, need to be obeyed, but he might not demand the close emotional relationship a mother might. A mother’s child (or her having children) might be the main source of her power, status, influence and prestige.

Lewis states the proximity stemmed from an increasing belief that mother and son shared the same substance or energies.²⁵⁷ Lewis recounts the story of Shen Xi (申喜), who, separated from his mother in childhood, was touched to hear her singing as a beggar many years later.²⁵⁸ Their common bond drew them together. Further, Master Zeng (曾子), Confucius’ disciple, was summoned from afar by his mother pinching her arm, demonstrating the physical connection over space.²⁵⁹ The story of Zeng was used later as a generic template in which filial piety was manifested by superhuman sensitivity to the pain

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 140.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁵⁴ Lewis, ‘Mothers and Sons’, pp. 258–9.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 260.

²⁵⁶ Brown, ‘Sons and Mothers’, p. 147.

²⁵⁷ Lewis, ‘Mothers and Sons’, p. 252. *HS* 80.3322.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 253. This story is recorded in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (吕氏春秋), *The Spring and Autumn (Annals) of Master Lü* 9.5 (compiled under Lü Buwei ca. 239 BCE).

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 253.

or need of one's mother.²⁶⁰ Lewis records an increased emphasis after the Han Dynasty on the emotional connection to birth mothers, and even wet nurses, over the formulaic familial mourning periods.²⁶¹ Mothers had always been the link between the father and son, enabling succession and legitimacy for an emperor. The more importance vying prospective mother empress dowagers had, the more the idea and concept of mother took precedence.

This change was assisted by the Han Dynasty's move away from the Western Han state's ideological focus on the primacy of official duty.²⁶² In this world, references to private duties, such as those to one's mother, could be elevated to avoid or circumnavigate the distasteful features of official duty, or even duty itself. Indeed, the tension between the private duty of filial piety and the duty to one's ruler was always fraught with tension.²⁶³ Brown states that by the end of the Han Dynasty, officials were apt to say that personal obligations should not be cast aside for official duties.²⁶⁴ A strong centralised imperial government with an imperial palace meant that the personal, and not the public, took precedence for many.²⁶⁵ Whereas the Western Han emperor and his imperial palace were the epicentre of power, prestige, wealth and access to land, this had changed in the Eastern Han. The increasing power and large landholdings of local elites meant a decline in taxation revenue and a corresponding decrease in the centralised power of the dynasty. Thus, the emphasis on official duty also declined.²⁶⁶ The ideology of official duty and impartiality had lost its appeal and the political elite became distracted from the affairs of state and ensconced in unofficial life.²⁶⁷ Traditionally private concerns, such as matters within the family and the status of one's family and clan, were increasingly emphasised at the cost of traditional official duties.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 256.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 265 ff.

²⁶² Brown, 'Sons and mothers', p. 151.

²⁶³ Nylan, 'Confucian Piety and Individualism', p. 3.

²⁶⁴ Brown, 'Sons and Mothers', pp. 151–2.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

Chapter Four. Gender Segregation

Many elements of Han Dynasty life increased the prominence of women and seemed to promote female involvement in imperial politics. However, powerful forces hindered female movement and women's access to various areas of public life. This restricted women's power outside the family unit or meant that power had to be wielded through control, ownership or influence over others rather than through direct action.

The concept of *zhenjie* (貞節) or chastity often resulted in domestic and public physical segregation of the sexes. This is because the separation of male and female was interrelated with concepts of chastity, fidelity and purity.²⁶⁸ This curtailed female mobility in physical and relational terms. This concept involved maintaining separate domestic spaces for men and women—something, perhaps, that only wealthier families could afford to implement.²⁶⁹ The segregation of the genders in terms of their roles, but also their physical spaces, was a Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) tradition.²⁷⁰ During the Zhou Dynasty, the division of labour, which allowed specialisation and thus created efficiencies, took on moral significance. It was in the Eastern Zhou period that separation of the sexes became official ideology²⁷¹ and moral virtue was symbolised by the physical separation of women from men, which resulted in control of the female body.²⁷²

Spatial delineation or separation was enacted in a variety of ways, and its purpose was to keep chaos at bay.²⁷³ Hinsch states that many wealthier homes had two levels, the upper level for women and the lower level for men.²⁷⁴ Such a measure necessarily limited female access to the outside world. In practical terms, exiting the house could likely not be achieved without male knowledge and, in keeping with the broader themes of the separation theory, male permission. Limiting female action in physical terms would have had a corresponding impact on the way in which women viewed themselves, their roles and ability to act. In a family without a patriarch, this would have been much reduced; and, in an imperial familial

²⁶⁸ Bret Hinsch, 'The Origins of Separation of the Sexes in China' *JAOS* 123.3 (2003).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

²⁷⁰ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 13.

²⁷¹ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 598.

²⁷² Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 16.

²⁷³ R. A. LaFleur, 'Review of Mark E. Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*', *Dao* 10 (2011).

²⁷⁴ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 613. This bears comparison to ancient Greek home design, in which similar segregation was enacted.

structure or any other where, by necessity, the patriarch had died, and the son been enthroned, the older mother was not constrained in the same way. It is worth noting that separation may have been decided and determined by men, but it was acted out by women. They were the ones who made sacrifices to implement the theory.²⁷⁵

Separation of the sexes, and thus gendered roles in society and the family, proliferated and grew to the extent that by the Han Dynasty, as Hinsch has said, ‘the ideal of men ploughing and women weaving had become a mainstay of social discourse’.²⁷⁶ Certainly, Ban Zhao promotes female dedication to sewing and weaving.²⁷⁷ It is clear weaving had a moral value. Women’s work in this regard produced clothes for their family and often additional items that might be sold for profit. Gendered tasks and their location had an enlivening effect on segregation. Indeed, in the future it appears to have influenced the very names women were given, with many women’s names drawn from spinning, weaving or silk-making terminology.²⁷⁸ The work assigned as female was arguably confined to within the house.²⁷⁹ Men tilled in the open fields to grow grain outside the house; women wove cloth inside the house.²⁸⁰ Sheng argues that this

spatial demarcation was so well integrated into the consciousness that when speaking to people outside the family household, a man referred to his wife as ‘the person inside’ (*neiren* 内人) and his wife, in turn, referred to him as ‘the person outside’ (*waizi* 外子).²⁸¹

The restrictions were not only for public space but also governed familial interactions. The *Liji* (禮記 [礼记]) or *Records of Rites* stipulates that men and women should not sit together, share towels or combs, or touch hands. Further, when a married aunt, sister or daughter returns home to visit, no brother of the family should sit on the same mat or eat from the same dish as her.²⁸² This resulted in separate physical spaces within the home, where the

²⁷⁵ Hinsch, ‘Separation of the Sexes’, p. 615.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 599. See also Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 54.

²⁷⁷ *NJ* 4; trans., Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 86.

²⁷⁸ In the Three Kingdoms period, after the Han Dynasty; Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, p. 174.

²⁷⁹ Yang, ‘Ban Zhao and Gender Issues’, p. 173. However, Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 69, has argued that women were involved in the manufacture of clothing from start to finish; that is, they tended the mulberry trees, harvesting, spinning, soaking cloth, dying and sewing. See also *LNZ* 2.5a; O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 60. Hinsch has further argued that textile production was a vital part of the Han Dynasty economy and its female producers a valuable economic force.

²⁸⁰ Angela Sheng, ‘Introduction from the Guest Editor: Women’s Work, Virtue and Space: Change from Early to Late Imperial China’, *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 36 (2012), p. 19.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 19. Hinsch, ‘Separation of the Sexes’, pp. 600–4.

²⁸² Wang, *Images of Women*, pp. 49–50. Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 16.

family's affluence allowed, with female spaces more cloistered and women encouraged to remain in the domestic quarters of wealthy homes.²⁸³ As will be further explored in examining the *Lienüzhuan*, gender segregation existed even within marriage.²⁸⁴ A much earlier text, the *Shijing*, states of husband and wife that, 'when living, we occupy different apartments. But when dead, we shall share the same grave'.²⁸⁵ This is, perhaps, not surprising as the household was built around the conjugal couple, or multiples thereof.²⁸⁶

The restrictions separating the genders concentrated over time more on curtailing and controlling female behaviour.²⁸⁷ Both worlds were full of hierarchical relationships. Men who ventured outside could partake in a wider range of activities and experience socialisation among their peers.²⁸⁸ This was not something women could enjoy; the asymmetry of the outer and inner world provided only limited activities for women and circumscribed experiences outside of the home, including visiting relatives nearby.²⁸⁹ Separation of the sexes became a justification for wide-ranging male privilege.²⁹⁰ Thus,

the reality of women's power within these spatial structures was masked by a formal subservience articulated by the textual tradition.²⁹¹

As Lewis states, 'the power of women was not merely a recurrent breakdown of norms, but a direct expression of basic principles of the organization of authority in early China'.²⁹²

Gender segregation was also reflected in official spaces, which were exclusively male. Only elite men staffed the bureaucracy and, as such, the official political space was male only.²⁹³ Female regents faced logistical problems in how they interacted with the male bureaucracy,

²⁸³ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 17.

²⁸⁴ Take, for example, Mengzi and his wife or the way in which Ban Zhao warns against husband and wife spending too much time together. See p. 76 ff. regarding Mengzi and p. 107 ff. regarding the *Nüjie* below. Lin-Lee Lee, 'Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness: Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women*', *Western Journal of Communication*. 73.1 (2009), p. 54, states men and women have distinctive spheres.

²⁸⁵ *Book of Odes*, I, VI, iv, 3 (Legge, 1, 121). Referred to by Emperor Ai, *HS* 11.5a; Dubs III, p. 29.

²⁸⁶ LaFleur, 'Mark Lewis, Space in Early China', p. 114.

²⁸⁷ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 596.

²⁸⁸ Sheng, 'Women's Work Virtue and Space', p. 20.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹⁰ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 19.

²⁹¹ LaFleur, 'Mark Lewis: Space in Early China', p. 113.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁹³ Sheng, 'Women's Work Virtue and Space', p. 21.

as they could not directly converse with them. This is further explored in the section on *female regency* below (p. 164).

Maintaining gender segregation was considered of the utmost importance in terms of the proper functioning of natural phenomena.²⁹⁴ That is, not following gendered divisions had religious and physical consequences. This stems back to concepts of *yin* and *yang*, two separate and distinct identities that related to masculine and feminine existence. Raphals has argued that women's identification with *yin* was a form of disparagement, as *yin* was associated with earth, debasement and desire.²⁹⁵ The very religious underpinning of Han Dynasty society, through the duality of *yin* and *yang* forces combined with essentialised gender ideals regarding male and female roles, served to define and constrict female agency.

Indeed, the specific roles inhabited by women even extended into the bedchambers of early China. Harper's examination of a second century BCE manuscript, the *He Yin-Yang* (合陰陽 [合陰陽]) or *Harmonisation of Yin and Yang* from the Mawangdui (馬王堆) archaeological site, reveals that sexual intercourse for people in this period could take on an element of self-cultivation, particularly for men.²⁹⁶ The authors of the manuscript posited that female vapours (or, in modern terms, secretions) mixed with those belonging to men during sex and that this mixing could strengthen men. Specifically, male partners benefited from absorbing *yin* essence from their female partner. This could only successfully occur if the male partner completed the ten refinements, essentially ten ways of using his penis, to achieve the ten intermissions.²⁹⁷ Harper suggests that the ten intermissions take readers through various stages of sexual intercourse which culminate in female orgasm. Thus, female orgasm is necessary for the male partner to obtain *yin* essence nourishment.²⁹⁸

The focus of that manuscript is on male achievement. In unsurprisingly gendered terms, the male is active and the female receptive.²⁹⁹ Male actions influence the female partner's responses and the female partner has little role other than to submit to their male partner's

²⁹⁴ Hinsch, 'Separation of the sexes', p. 602.

²⁹⁵ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 7.

²⁹⁶ Donald Harper, 'The Sexual Arts of Ancient China as Described in a Manuscript of the Second Century B.C', *HJAS* 47.1 (1987), p. 549.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 588 and 591.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 591.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

actions. Harper admits that sexual manuals were generally written for men.³⁰⁰ In line with androcentric ideology, it is penile vapour that is the strongest.³⁰¹ This has a perhaps unfortunate outcome for male partners; semen retention was an important part of the physical cultivation of sexual intercourse.³⁰² Semen retention involved either the avoidance of male orgasm or pressing the urethra at the moment of ejaculation to force the semen into the bladder. Concerning the latter, the belief was that the penile vapour would travel up the spine and replenish the brain.³⁰³ Here, in the most intimate settings, male and female roles and outcomes were defined and distinct. A man could benefit from sex with a woman and through the retention of his semen; the woman was rendered a tool for male achievement. This also relates to Daoist accounts of techniques for exercising sexual self-restraint the return of spermatic essence.³⁰⁴ Harper also refers to a Japanese medical text dating from 984 CE, the *Ishinpō* (醫心方 [医心方]), which has preserved many early Chinese texts on sexual practices, as outlining that if the two vapours are conjoined in harmony and a man knows how to nurture *yin*, then a boy will be conceived.³⁰⁵ Conception of a male foetus is here a mark of success, again underpinning the preferential status of men.

Chan has argued that what originates as functional divisions in the roles men and women played later resulted in the physical segregation seen in the Han Dynasty.³⁰⁶ While men plough, women spin silk and the two are functionally defined and distinct. The functional roles women held and the limits on their physical movements meant they could not access two things:

1. the wisdom that men could attain, and which further enhanced their superiority; and
2. in the political arena, women were unable to take up political posts or serve in the government –thus falling outside the space in which virtue is displayed by men and independence can be explored.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 567 n.57.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 553.

³⁰² Ibid., p. 549.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Riegel, 'Beginnings of *Shijing* Commentary', p. 155.

³⁰⁵ Harper, 'Sexual Arts', p. 585. Note *Ishinpō* Chapter 28 deals with sexual behaviour.

³⁰⁶ Chan, 'Gender and Relationship Roles', p. 118.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

Thus, 'given their domestic role, there seems no way for women to perfect the empire through serving in a government' in the way men can.³⁰⁸

Physical segregation is evident in the edict of Han Dynasty Emperor Xuan (宣帝) (r. 74–49 BCE) that men and women were to use different roads.³⁰⁹ Hinsch states that as this was impractical, the intention was likely that men and women were to keep apart on the road.³¹⁰ Liu Xiang states, somewhat comically, in the *Lienüzhuan* that Qiu Huzi (秋胡子) propositioned his own wife on his return from a five-year absence from home.³¹¹ It was, of course, this kind of behaviour that was to be avoided. Hinsch states the mythical elements of the story probably mean Liu Xiang has embellished an earlier popular tale for his own purposes.³¹² Sima Qian states that 'when men and women are not distinguished, chaos arises'.³¹³ It is this view that we see instances of in the *Lienüzhuan*, such as where Bo Ji (伯姬) of the Song state preferred to burn in a palace fire rather than leave the palace without an escort.³¹⁴ This is often used as an extreme example of upholding the ideals of womanly behaviour. Whether this is based in a real event is of little consequence; the retelling of the incident in the *Lienüzhuan* reveals that it was presented as an aspirational story. The behaviour of Bo Ji is to be mimicked and implemented by women. This plasters over the underlying theme, that women must adhere to the rules of society even at the pain of death. This should not be surprising considering the importance of self-sacrifice to maintain adherence to the principles of Han culture. On the other hand, there were notable exceptions to gender segregation. The wife of a senior official in the kingdom of Jibei (濟北 [济北]) was treated by the western Han physician Chunyu Yi (淳于意) for an inability to urinate.³¹⁵ This reveals that male practitioners could and did treat women for what might be termed quite intimate health issues. Gender segregation, like all other general principles, had and must have had exceptions.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 602 n 38. *SJ* 96.2688.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 602.

³¹¹ *LNZ* 5.104–6.

³¹² Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 604.

³¹³ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 605. *SJ* 24.1196.

³¹⁴ *LNZ* 4.74–5; O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 103–6.

³¹⁵ Bret Hinsch, 'Review Article: The Genre of Women's Biographies in Imperial China', *Nan Nü* 2 (2009), p. 119.

By the late Western Han Dynasty, the sources would have us believe that it was a widespread attitude that members of the two genders mixing was dangerous. The question is, was this a belief of the elite only or was it held more broadly? It is certainly possible that Han Dynasty texts that refer to the separation of the sexes were retrospectively projecting it onto the Zhou, Xia and Shang to increase its legitimacy.³¹⁶ This is certainly the case when we consider Sima Qian's view that the state of Jin fell into chaos because of the mixing of the genders.³¹⁷ It is significant that separation of the sexes was considered a definitive part of Chinese identity. Han Chinese commented with disapproval that non-Chinese peoples did not separate the sexes.³¹⁸ This provides insight into the restrictions women were subject to and the rules of propriety that could hinder their agency. It also informs the attitude and approach to women we see from men, including male historians.

³¹⁶ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', p. 604.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 606. *SJ* 43.1786 and 105.2786.

³¹⁸ Hinsch, 'Separation of the Sexes', pp. 606–7.

Chapter Five. Biography as History in the Han Dynasty

Thus far this thesis has examined mythological women and the cultural underpinning of the Han Dynasty. Such factors influenced the histories and the records of women in the Han Dynasty, particularly imperial women. Those histories were written largely by historians within the Han Dynasty. The only impression we have of women comes from the written records. Woman is a construct from the historical sources. It is for this reason that an exploration of historiography, and the relevant historians, is vital to understanding the concept of woman presented by those historians and what women could and could not do.

Historiography in the Han Dynasty was the product of individuals living in, or with good access to, the imperial court. These men had access to pre-existing historical records and contemporary state documents.³¹⁹ When examining Han history, historians are heavily reliant on the one or two dynastic histories for an account of what happened.³²⁰ These histories are understandably focused on the imperial court and political matters. The two major historical works, which are near contemporary and in part cover the Han Dynasty, are by Sima Qian (145–86 BCE), who created the *Shiji*, and Ban Gu (32–92 CE), who wrote the *Hanshu*. There is, additionally, the *Hou Hanshu*; however due its later compilation in the fifth century it has not been critically examined in this thesis.³²¹

Both the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* are extensive and contain a wide variety of historical information, including significant biographical accounts of emperors and prominent individuals. Their focus on women is minimal; as Wilkinson has reported, 95 per cent of the people mentioned in the *Shiji* are men, and 97 per cent in the *Hanshu*.³²² However, with the creation of biographies of women, and two texts concerned with womanhood, the Han Dynasty provided a profile for women. This trend also spawned a tradition of women's biography. Although neither the *Shiji* or *Hanshu* contain a biography of empresses and imperial consorts, shortly after the Han Dynasty such categories were regular features of histories.³²³

³¹⁹ De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960), p. 267.

³²⁰ This is emphasised by Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 3.

³²¹ Michael Nylan, 'The ku wen Documents in Han Times', *TP* 81.1/3 (1995), p. 27, comments, for instance, that accounts in the *Hou Hanshu* of Han Dynasty classicism must be treated with extreme caution due to the time difference.

³²² Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, p. 178.

³²³ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, pp. 16–7. Mou comments that such later biographies 'simultaneously display a cultural interpretation of them [women] and reveals what culture hoped or wished them to be, while occasionally betraying what they actually did and were, despite any idealistic portrayals'.

Written texts from this time are rare and valuable items. The ability to read was a definite skill rather than a normal capacity. Classical Chinese was and is a difficult language to understand in its written form, in part due to its brevity of expression. As Hinsch has highlighted, relatively few in Han Dynasty China attained full literacy, meaning that biographies, like other written texts, take on an almost supernatural quality.³²⁴

It is difficult to effectively analyse traditional biographical writing regarding Han Dynasty women. This is due to the carefully constructed, detailed and yet anecdotal nature of Chinese biography, which seeks to focus the reader's attention on normative patterns of behaviour.³²⁵ This style borrows from the example of Confucius's didactic use of specific examples to illustrate broader concepts and ideas.³²⁶ The sources for biographies differ from those used for the annals of standard histories. Rather, they rely on information from a variety of sources, including private individuals. This is important as,

[w]omen served as symbols of family honour in patriarchal discourse, and in-laws manipulated the details of a deceased woman's biography to make her life into a tribute to themselves.³²⁷

It is obvious that the actual female experience may thus differ greatly from the eulogised account. Indeed, female experience in the imperial court was likely very different from the negative accounts of women that resulted from subsequent shifts in power. It is worth noting that the ancient Roman tendency to dismiss biography in preference to unitary narratives is not a preference replicated in ancient China.³²⁸ This is perhaps because Chinese biography is less individual. Chinese biographies do not dwell on the individual's uniqueness.³²⁹ Rather, authors, deliberately imposed an orthodox view of time, society, and politics upon the narrative, subsuming the subject's individuality in the process.³³⁰ This is true of the women we see reflected by Han Dynasty historians.

³²⁴ Hinsch, 'The Genre of Women's Biographies', p. 109.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid., pp. 104–5.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 107. Rather, biographies can be focused on the actions, as opposed to the actors. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 29.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 107. Clyde Sargent, 'Subsidized History: Pan Ku and the Historical Records of the Former Han Dynasty', *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 3.2 (1944), p. 134.

History is normative and Han Dynasty biography provides accounts of events as they should have been, as much as how they were.³³¹ The biographical nature of many of the texts means they straddle the line between fact and fiction.³³² Han Dynasty biography is very much focused on the ‘big picture’, on the historical and moral patterns. It is also concerned with the individual in terms of their location within society rather than providing insights into any inner turmoil. This translates to a particular treatment of women, and the biographies of women reveal as much if not more about the men who wrote them than about the women they are supposedly focused on.³³³

There has traditionally been a western view of Chinese history and dynastic histories in the mould of the *Hanshu* and *Shiji* that sees these texts as compilations which lack historical character. This is demonstrated by the three conclusions reached by Sargent in 1944 regarding Ban Gu:

1. he is a compiler, not an historian or a critical scholar;³³⁴
2. he did not make judgments, but he did have impressions; and
3. he was required to make his conspicuous impressions agree with the views of his patrons, the Liu Family.³³⁵

Some of the conclusions may seem a little severe and, to modern eyes, less nuanced than we would wish. Sargent strikes at several vital aspects of Ban Gu’s position and writing. Ban Gu certainly felt pressure to validate and aggrandise the Liu family as rulers.

Sargent highlights a perceived deficiency in early Chinese history. This deficiency is the lack of directly analytical content.³³⁶ Certainly, the concept of a writer’s personal and unique writing, for which they claimed complete responsibility, is not an emphasis in the Chinese historical tradition.³³⁷ There is often a perceived lack of examination of causality in the

³³¹ Sargent, ‘Pan Ku and the Historical Records’, p. 134.

³³² Bret Hinsch, ‘Cross-genre influence on the fictional aspects of *Lienü* narratives/列女故事跨文體影響研究’, *Journal of Oriental Studies* 41 (2006), p. 64.

³³³ Hinsch, ‘The Genre of Women’s Biographies’, p. 111. Mou, *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions*, p. 21. Mou refers to the biographies of women in Chinese history being an ‘imposed appropriation’.

³³⁴ Michael Loewe, ‘Ban Gu: copyist, creator and critic’, *Bulletin of SOAS* 78.2 (2015), p. 333. Note similar comments have been made about Sima Qian and the *Shiji*.

³³⁵ Sargent, ‘Pan Ku and the Historical records’, p. 132.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³³⁷ Loewe, ‘Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic’, p. 333.

histories.³³⁸ Sargent uses the example of Ban Gu's treatment of Wang Mang's currency reforms. Ban Gu provides copious detail concerning the new coins to be introduced but he does not offer the reader an explanation as to the reason for the reforms.³³⁹ Similarly, Ban Gu avoids examining and analysing the broader contextual reasons for the rebellion of Wang Mang.³⁴⁰ Yet we are advised that the 'justice and virtue' of the throne is upheld.³⁴¹ Sargent views Ban Gu as

more concerned with how the virtuous should behave than with the impelling causes of behaviour, particularly as these environmental causes affect political behaviour. This emphasis on abstract principles of political morality and an ethical evaluation of history precluded the necessity to investigate historical events on a basis of existing circumstances, and the manifestation of historical facts was subordinated to expressed judgments of actual events in their relation to theoretical, traditional standards.³⁴²

Considering the above, Ban Gu's text can be seen to provide guidance as to virtuous and thus desirable conduct on the part of women. The alleged deficiency in the text reveals as much about Ban Gu and his context as it does ours. The modern historian's obsession with reasons and causation and relationships is not one mirrored in the concerns of Ban Gu and, frankly, why would we expect that it would be? There is another explanation provided by Sargent. Considering Confucian thought, a student should be able to deduce three-quarters of Confucius' meaning after being given one-quarter. Sargent posits that perhaps Ban Gu expects a similar standard from his readers.³⁴³ This is a difficult feat for a modern reader who is not within the Han Dynasty context. A contemporary reader, as a member of the literary elite, would have had comprehensive knowledge of the Confucian canon and thus have been easily able to interpret nuances in the 'compilation' of Ban Gu that we may fail to identify, let alone grasp.

There are questions surrounding whether the *Hanshu* can be considered an original creation.³⁴⁴ This is particularly when we consider that some of the *Hanshu* is direct repetition

³³⁸ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 5.

³³⁹ Sargent, 'Pan Ku and the Historical records', p. 133.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–4.

³⁴⁴ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 333.

of the *Shiji*.³⁴⁵ Compilation and the choices involved are not incongruous with being a historian, especially when considering the Chinese and Han model of writing. The process of compiling, and thus editing, information is surely the creation of a view of history (or historical events) in preference over some other view. Thus, it may not be an original creation yet still be a didactic historical work. This is relevant when we consider what the *Hanshu* says about women and consider to what extent that reflects the sources available to Ban Gu at the time.

Ban Gu was part of the restoration of the Liu imperial family to power and, as such, had a vested interest in delegitimising Wang Mang's fourteen-year dynasty.³⁴⁶ Indeed Ban Biao refers to the rise of the Wang family under the reign of Emperor Cheng.³⁴⁷ As Loewe states,

Ban Gu would have been aware of how members of the Wang family had secured commanding positions during Chengdi's reign and of how Wang Mang, at first a loyal supporter of the house of Liu, had shaken free of such ties and established a dynasty in his own name.³⁴⁸

Wang Mang's treachery was fresh in the mind of Ban Gu. The signs of its rise, commencing with Emperor Cheng's love of wine and women, were laid out for the reader of the *Hanshu*.³⁴⁹ The *Hanshu* and Ban Gu have important messages to impart when it comes to women within the political and imperial arena.

Sima Qian and Ban Gu have been criticised as heavily reliant on paraphrased sections of other works or borrowing sections of them verbatim.³⁵⁰ Such criticisms are indicative of an ignorance of the style and subtlety of Chinese historiography and smack of cultural imperialism. This approach fails to consider the way a single editorial comment among the composition of prior historical works is all that is needed to express ideology.³⁵¹ Further, it overlooks the anxiety of Ban Gu and other Han Dynasty authors to include the writings of

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 345. Loewe, for instance, highlights that *HS* 25 is a duplication of *SJ* 28 *Feng and Shan sacrifices*.

³⁴⁶ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 235, where Bielenstein comments that Wang Mang was 'no innovator' and that his 'major policies were a direct continuation of former Han practices'.

³⁴⁷ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

³⁴⁸ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 336.

³⁴⁹ Ban Gu states that from the reign of Emperor Cheng onwards, the Wang family first grasped power of the state. *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

³⁵⁰ Grant Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. xiii.

³⁵¹ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. xv.

others in their work, as a completely standard practice.³⁵² The composition of history involves decisions about what prior texts best express the historian's current ideas. Compiling elements of other texts and incorporating some new content is consistent with this.³⁵³

Historians of Han Dynasty China had instructive aims. Historical information was infused with moral judgements. Han Dynasty history was very different to the Roman tradition, such that, 'Sima Qian's book is based on a radically different notion of history' to that of Roman historians.³⁵⁴ It is also very different from what the modern historian might write or expect. Hardy has argued that Sima Qian was seeking in his history writing to discover rather than to create, so that

his ideal chronicler is a sage who can penetrate surface events and discover the moral truths they contain.³⁵⁵

For Sima Qian and Ban Gu, the writing of history was about re-presenting past texts with some additions and, through the very writing itself, discovering something new. Thus, Han Dynasty historiography involved a different style of history with less first-hand creation and more compilation and insertion.

As Clark has stated,

I suggest that 'authorship' in ancient China had less to do with what of one's words were set to pages than what of his or her own thoughts and opinions were expressed in them. Editing, quoting and revising is authorship in the early Chinese context.³⁵⁶

This quotation perfectly explains the way Han Dynasty historians used the extraction of older texts, often philosophical ones, to express their world view. Furthermore,

relationships of cause and effect are created by editorial arrangement, and success or failure often signal the underlying moral value of a course of action.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 333.

³⁵³ Indeed, Loewe describes Ban Gu as 'primarily responsible' for the *Hanshu*. Ibid., p. 334.

³⁵⁴ Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, p. xiii.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., p. xv.

³⁵⁶ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 19.

³⁵⁷ Jonathan Markley, *Peace and Peril: Sima Qian's Portrayal of Han-Xiongnu Relations*, PhD thesis, Macquarie University (2005), p. 4.

Han Historians were individuals living and working in the imperial court. Their main difficulty lay in the need to give the emperor good advice when required. Yet officials also needed to protect their positions by not alienating the emperor.³⁵⁸

Sima Qian

Sima Tan (司馬談) commenced the *Shiji*, and it was largely completed by his son, Sima Qian.³⁵⁹ Sima Tan is often viewed as having Daoist leanings, although these tendencies were not necessarily shared by his son.³⁶⁰ Sima Qian was a contemporary of the early Western Han Dynasty and the *Shiji* was arguably the first large and comprehensive Chinese history. He was employed by the Emperor Wu as Grand Historian, a role held by his father before him. This position, as Watson points out, was largely linked to astrological events and their recording rather than the literary history the two men produced.³⁶¹ It should be noted that Sima Qian lost favour with Emperor Wu following a court intrigue, and his history is thus not an imperially sanctioned one. Indeed, his work is often viewed as a critique of Emperor Wu. Hinsch has gone so far as to label the *Shiji* a 'jeremiad' against Emperor Wu.³⁶²

Sima Qian wrote the history of the dynasty he lived in, the Han, and of the preceding years, including the Warring States period. Living and working in the Han Dynasty equipped Sima Qian to adeptly analyse the events and individuals he records. As the *Shiji* was started by his father, continuing the work was a private duty and an expression of filial piety for Sima Qian.³⁶³ Indeed, the text was not broadly or publicly available.³⁶⁴ This reveals Sima Qian's motivation as more private than official, an important distinction from the later Ban Gu.

Sima Qian wrote during the reign of Emperor Wu. Hardy has argued that Sima Qian was concerned and sceptical about the reforms of this emperor. Up to the reign of Emperor Wu, the Western Han Dynasty had survived as an empire in the form of a conglomeration of

³⁵⁸ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 4.

³⁵⁹ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 3.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁶¹ Watson I, p. xv.

³⁶² Hinsch, 'The Genre of Women's Biographies', p. 107. The effect this had on Sima Qian's treatment of Empress Lü will be addressed in chapter eleven of the thesis.

³⁶³ A.F.P. Hulsewé, 'Notes on the Historiography of the Han Period', in W. Beasley & E. Pulleyblank, (eds.), *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 39. Filial piety of course being a key Confucian virtue and a Roman virtue as well. The tearful encounter between son and father is recounted in *Shiji* 130. An English translation is found in De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960), p. 269.

³⁶⁴ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 334.

feudal lords and surrogate kings and maintained the traditional aristocracy. During the early Western Han Dynasty, this old-fashioned decentralisation still reigned. Such a power structure was, in many ways, Confucian, as it included lords, gentlemen and strict hierarchies based on these positions. Emperor Wu removed this aristocratic system and started implementing legalist reforms that harked back to the Qin Dynasty and centralised government.³⁶⁵ Confucian theory underpins Sima Qian's work and his society. This explains why the earlier leaders of the Han Dynasty (pre-dating Emperor Wu) are often presented in a positive light by Sima Qian. Indeed, Puette maintains that it is for this reason that Sima Qian draw subtle parallels between Emperor Wu and the first Qin emperor.³⁶⁶ In this way, Sima Qian underlines the lack of virtue of Emperor Wu.³⁶⁷ Sima Qian's scepticism towards a centralised strengthened state and imperial power certainly is consistent with his loyalty to a more old-fashioned Confucian theory.

The sentiment against the Emperor Wu likely also had a more personal cause. When Sima Qian 'defended a fellow official from the emperor's wrath' he displeased the emperor.³⁶⁸ Sima Qian was sentenced to castration, and he was expected to commit suicide to avoid such a punishment.³⁶⁹ That Sima Qian chose castration rather than suicide is presented as testament of his devotion to his art. The explanation he provides in his letter to friend Ren An (任安) is instructive.³⁷⁰ Sima Qian himself tells of his dedication to the histories he has begun and his desire for immortality in them:

But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling among this filth, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart that I have not been able

³⁶⁵ Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, p. 22. Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 202. Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 166. This centralisation was an attempt to avoid the dispersal of power which enabled revolts against the emperor.

³⁶⁶ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, p. 202.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, p. 4 (there is a fuller account on p. 18).

³⁶⁹ At Watson I opening page of book. Sima Qian himself in *SJ* 62 (his own biography) tells us the official was the general Li Ling (李陵). The expectation was that to avoid castration officials would commit suicide. Knechtges states Sima Qian chose to sacrifice his integrity and submit to the most disgraceful and humiliating punishment. Knechtges, D.R., "Key Words", Authorial Intent, and Interpretation: Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 30 (Dec., 2008), p. 82.

³⁷⁰ De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), p. 371. Note the letter does not appear in the *Shiji*.

to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity.³⁷¹

Writing history was a serious and personal business for Sima Qian. He was also sensitive to, and the subject of, political whim. For instance, Knechtges states the letter to Ren An is not included in the *Shiji* because Sima Qian, having escaped death for supporting Li Ling, knew it would be ‘impolitic’ for him to say anything further in support of Li Ling.³⁷² Yet the above extract from the letter demonstrates that Chinese authorship, to Sima Qian, was about expressing an individual’s thoughts. Sima Qian was ambitious and sought immortality through the writing of his history, and he wanted his readers to know this.³⁷³ As Hardy explains, ‘he wrote history to preserve his ideas’.³⁷⁴ Even though Sima Qian is often aloof in the *Shiji*, the work is an expression of his identity.

Sima Qian’s history also aimed to provoke thought, primarily about Confucianism. Indeed, Durrant argues that Confucius is the main character of the *Shiji*.³⁷⁵ It might be more accurate, however, to say that Confucian theory forms the ideological pediments of the edifice of the *Shiji*. Hardy certainly agrees and sees Sima Qian’s basic attitudes as Confucian,³⁷⁶ going so far to offer a detailed analysis of how Sima Qian imitates the Confucian master.³⁷⁷ Durrant also outlines how the *Analects* are the most-used source in Sima Qian’s records, making clear the link between the historical and the philosophical.³⁷⁸

In his *Biographies of Confucian Scholars*, Sima Qian tells of the renown of various Confucians, commenting that the words of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are ‘subtle and its ideas profound’.³⁷⁹ This makes it clear that Confucian theory was an important influence, and likely the most important influence. This should not be surprising, considering its currency in Han Dynasty thought at the time. Confucian theory underpins the presentation

³⁷¹ Watson, excerpt of Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An, presumably Watson’s own translation of Ban Gu’s *Hanshu 63 Biographies of Sima Qian*, modified by De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), translation p. 372. His castration is also attested in *HS* 62.17b–21b.

³⁷² Knechtges, ‘Sima Qian’s Letter to Ren An’, p. 77.

³⁷³ Indeed, Knechtges argues that the letter to Ren An is testament to Sima Qian’s concerns regarding his defence of Li Ling, his punishment and the *Shiji*. Knechtges, ‘Sima Qian’s Letter to Ren An’, p. 80.

³⁷⁴ Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, p. 119. See also Puett, ‘The Ambivalence of Creation’, p. 180.

³⁷⁵ Stephen Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 29.

³⁷⁶ Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, p. 16.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 115–22, offers a full discussion.

³⁷⁸ Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror*, p. 32.

³⁷⁹ *SJ* 121; Watson II, p. 356.

of individuals Sima Qian wanted to be viewed as virtuous. Indeed, Sima Qian's facts are normative; they praised good and censured evil as conceptualised by Confucian theory and Sima Qian himself.³⁸⁰ There are also arguments that Daoist thinking, much more complex and perhaps abstract in its theory of 'non-action', also influences Sima Qian. At the end of his biography of Empress Lü, Sima Qian comments that her reign was characterised by such non-action and the people prospered as a result.³⁸¹ This is viewed as a clear Daoist endorsement. Arguably, such sentiments are also mirrored in Confucian thought, where a ruler should rule by example and not by coercive force, and in keeping with the mandate of heaven.³⁸² A ruler's agency should thus be limited in scope—albeit the historian, who edited history, could bestow heaven's blessing retrospectively upon the relevant emperor's rule to reflect his worthiness.³⁸³

Sima Qian also entered the debate about the role of the inner and outer court. Sima Qian was similar to Ban Gu, who similarly was a member of the outer court. This did not prevent Sima Qian from expressing views in the *Shiji* regarding the functioning of the inner court. In *Shiji* chapter 49, Sima Qian draws a distinct link between the rise and fall of previous dynasties and the role of women. He states that it was by the assistance of virtuous women that the Xia, Shang and Zhou came to power.³⁸⁴ In contrast, a common theme in the Han era is that a lack of virtuous women led to issues with imperial rule and problems for the dynasty. This is not surprising when we consider the Confucian theory which influenced Sima Qian. Similarly, to Liu Xiang, Sima Qian places the behaviour of women as causally connected to the success of their male counterparts and the dynasty.

Ban Gu

The art of *official* court history is more evident in the work of Ban Gu, who was similarly embedded in the imperial court. Ban Gu was a contemporary of the Eastern Han Dynasty

³⁸⁰ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 18. For a more detailed analysis of the Confucian aspects of Sima Qian, see Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, p. 179 f.

³⁸¹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 284, Nienhauser II, p. 137. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a Confucian text which may have been the work of Confucius himself.

³⁸² *Analects* 2.3; trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 8. Confucius also makes the comment that rulers should not call on their people to work on state projects all the time. This is making unnecessary frequent demands for their labour. *Analects* 1.5; trans. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 2.

³⁸³ Hans Bielenstein 'Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han dynasty, and Later Han' in Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 223. The kind of victimisation which was inflicted on Wang Mang, Bielenstein also refers to as being visited being upon women who 'usurped' traditionally male power.

³⁸⁴ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 17. *SJ* 49.1967.

who composed a work covering the history of the Western Han Dynasty. He was writing during the reign of Emperor Zhang (章帝) (r. 75–88 CE) and Emperor He. His father, Ban Biao, had started a historical work during his life which his son, and later his daughter, continued. Ban Gu's sister, Ban Zhao (46–116 CE) was favoured by Emperor He and his Empress Deng (鄧皇后) (r. as regent 102–106 CE). She was a teacher in the imperial court, an author and a contributor to the *Hanshu*. The Ban family was one of high status; many of its members lived in the imperial palace serving the emperor.³⁸⁵ In line with their high station, Ban Gu's work also involved an aggrandisement of his own family members. Indeed, following in his father's footsteps Ban Gu was accused of making his own private alterations to the history and had to be saved from punishment by his twin brother, Ban Chao (班超).³⁸⁶ He appears to have recovered and was in favour during the reign of Emperor Zheng.³⁸⁷ Yet, with the vicissitudes of life, Ban Gu died in prison due to his association with the Dou family, who had fallen from power.³⁸⁸

Ban Gu followed Sima Qian's example, and some of his history covers the same period. His work is, however, exclusively Han focused and the two have very different ideological stances. Sima Qian is unsure about the political environment he found himself in and expressed his concerns in his writing of history. Ban Gu presents the Han Dynasty leadership of his own time more favourably. Sima Qian's work is often viewed as more eccentric and detailed, while Ban Gu's history sometimes is seen to resemble

dry recitals of official acts and pronouncements, with little ... to the personalities and private lives of the ruler.³⁸⁹

As a result, the *Hanshu* has little of the narrative force of Sima Qian and is more a chronicle summarising events and pronouncements. This is primarily because Ban Gu pursued writing history for a very different reason to Sima Qian. The divergence between the two also results from their different contexts. Sima Qian, living in the reign of Emperor Wu, enjoyed a stable political environment. Ban Gu, on the other hand, grew up during the aftermath of the Xin

³⁸⁵ As is the case with Ban Zhao and her teaching, her brother Ban Gu and his history writing, and her other brother Ban Chao and his work on the border regions. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 25 ff. Their ancestors. Aunt Ban Jieyu and Uncle Ban Bo, both served in the Imperial Court, as did their father Ban Biao.

³⁸⁶ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 334. Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 40A, 1334.

³⁸⁷ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 334.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

³⁸⁹ Burton Watson, *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han Dynasty by Pan Ku* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 5.

Dynasty. The Xin Dynasty was established when Emperor Ping and Emperor Ruzi (孺子) died and Wang Mang ruled as emperor (rather than regent as he had previously).³⁹⁰ Arguably this influenced Ban Gu's approach to imperial women, such that he similarly to Sima Qian and Liu Xiang emphasised the importance of virtuous women. The early period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, when the Liu family regained their power, was understandably a time of uncertainty. The imperial court needed legitimacy, and this is something Ban Gu's work provides.³⁹¹ The *Hanshu* must be viewed considering this history, remembering that

[t]he circumstances of his life and its antecedents compelled him to textually repair the kingdom producing a record that functions as a cautionary tale in which he critiqued anyone who might threaten Han sovereignty.³⁹²

Sima Qian was motivated by filial piety in his writing of the *Shiji*, as his own writing attests. Ban Gu makes no such appeals to filial duty in his authorship,³⁹³ although it is worth noting his work started out the same way as Sima Qian's, as Ban Gu also continued the work of his father. Ban Gu was at first imprisoned for his historical works and was famously saved by the Emperor Ming (明帝) (r. 57–75 CE) who had read and been impressed by the work.³⁹⁴ Whether this is merely exaggeration is hard to tell. In any case, Ban Gu's history obtained official sanction and he was appointed to work in the imperial archives.³⁹⁵

Yet Ban Gu's place within the imperial court did not mean the *Hanshu* was never critical. Regarding Emperor Cheng, to whom Ban Gu's great-aunt Ban Jieyu (班婕妤) was consort, the *Hanshu* comments on the emperor's love of wine and concludes that this focus allowed the powerbase of Wang Mang to grow.³⁹⁶ The two historians had very different ideas. Sima Qian's motivation was personal duty to his father and his work expresses his own political ideology. Unlike Sima Qian, Ban Gu promoted a positive image of his family members in

³⁹⁰ Note that Bielenstein argues that Wang Mang did not poison Emperor Ping, citing the recent marriage of Wang Mang's daughter to Emperor Ping and her enthronement as empress; Wang Mang had no motivation for murdering the young Emperor Ping when he had created effective control and influence over the emperor. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 229.

³⁹¹ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 94.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24. On his deathbed Sima Tan begs his son to continue his work.

³⁹⁴ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 64.

³⁹⁵ Watson, *Selections from Pan Ku*, p. 4. Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 25.

³⁹⁶ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 48. Yet earlier at 10.16a the *Hanshu* uses a phrase in *Analepts* 16.5 to praise Emperor Cheng.

his history.³⁹⁷ The *Hanshu* was a thoroughly family affair, begun by Ban Gu's father and continued by his sister Ban Zhao after his death.³⁹⁸ Further, the importance of Ban Zhao and Ban Jieyu within history and the Ban family arguably meant Ban Gu viewed women in a politically different way to Sima Qian, conferring more agency and more responsibility (or culpability) on imperial women.

Clark has argued that Ban Gu's identity is inextricably linked to the identity of his clan.³⁹⁹ This is consistent with the concept of the family as the political unit of Han Dynasty China. The family works together to benefit its members and the family's situation. It is thus not surprising that Ban Gu attempted in his history to elevate the status of his clan and cleanse the image of his family. The Ban family rose to become powerful and influential in court politics probably as the result of Ban Gu's great-aunt, Ban Jieyu, being admitted to the imperial harem.⁴⁰⁰ Yet Ban Gu repositions this family elevation as the result of their usefulness rather than the sexual currency of his great-aunt. He also uses his position as historian to accentuate the importance of Ban Bo, his great-uncle and minister for the emperor.⁴⁰¹ Imperial court politics was a cutthroat game and gaining power was an ongoing battle. It is in view of this that the Ban clan's 'rise to power was probably more calculated than Ban Gu was willing to explicitly suggest in his narrative'.⁴⁰²

Getting Ban Jieyu into the imperial harem would have been a vital, and no doubt deliberate, step. Clark argues that

[h]istory in Ban Gu's narrative was moulded to advantage his clan's and, thus, his own relationship to the ruling family.⁴⁰³

It is for this reason that Clark sees the *Hanshu* as Ban Gu's 'inscription of himself'.⁴⁰⁴ Further, as there is no contemporary historian with whose work the *Hanshu* can be

³⁹⁷ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 63. This is something discussed by Clark and important to the distinction between the two authors.

³⁹⁸ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 66, does not specify her evidence for this assertion. She probably gleaned this information from Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* 84.2785, which states that Ban Zhao was ordered by the emperor to finish the work.

³⁹⁹ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 62.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

compared, we cannot be sure of exactly how much Ban Gu's relationship with his great-aunt affected his description of Emperor Cheng's reign.⁴⁰⁵ At the least, Ban Gu was willing to confer virtue on his great-aunt legitimising her actions and on the converse disparage other imperial women such as the Zhao sisters. Both Sima Qian and Ban Gu created deeply personal texts despite divergent motivations.

Just as Sima Qian was a disciple of the Confucian theory that saturated the intellectual culture of China of his time, Ban Gu similarly held Confucian values. Ban Gu particularly promoted Confucian virtues through 'valorising the paragons of those beliefs'.⁴⁰⁶ Indeed, Ban Gu was very keen to depict himself and his family as strong Confucians.⁴⁰⁷ It is interesting, however, that Ban Gu and his father saw Sima Qian as not remaining true to the judgements of the sage (Confucius).⁴⁰⁸ This is a matter of interpretation; Sima Qian probably thought his history and its ideas were in keeping with Confucian theory.⁴⁰⁹ There is a substantial time gap between the lives of Sima Qian and Ban Gu. Confucian ideology evolved and shifted as time passed. Confucianism became arguably stricter and increasingly dominant as the Eastern Han Dynasty emerged.

Thus, the difference between Sima Qian and Ban Gu's works can be attributed to changes in ideological trends in Confucian theory during the Han Dynasty. Sima Qian wrote prior to the intervening Xin Dynasty and the 'aberration' of Wang Mang. Loewe has argued that the concept of the mandate of heaven enjoyed increasing prominence and was strictly applied to the Han Dynasty rulers after (and due to) Wang Mang's rule.⁴¹⁰ Further, the sayings of Confucius were not used as regularly in the time of Sima Qian.⁴¹¹ The trend of looking further back and using the old sources of power and legitimacy occurred as a reaction to Wang Mang and the 'disruption' of the dynasty. While similar influences held sway over Sima Qian and Ban Gu, their personal experiences and particularly setting made a significant impact on their histories, and as shall be seen on the presentation of particular women.

⁴⁰⁵ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 339.

⁴⁰⁶ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 15.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 89–90.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 10 and Appendix D, pp. 198–201. HS 62 B. Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 68.

⁴⁰⁹ Although he was much more influenced by Huanglao thought. Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 12.

⁴¹⁰ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', pp. 336–7.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 337.

Chapter Six. Liu Xiang and the *Lienüzhuan* (列女傳)

It is the *Lienüzhuan* more than any other text that, by virtue of its scale and the significant role it held pioneering female biography, captures the interest of any examination of women in Han Dynasty China. It is the predominate text addressing women and the concept of woman within the Han Dynasty. Just as the text is fascinating, so is its creator. As will be seen in the discussion below, perhaps ‘creator’ is the most apt descriptor for Liu Xiang (劉向) (77–6 BCE).

Liu Xiang and his context

Vital to understanding the *Lienüzhuan* and its author is the answer to the question, who was Liu Xiang? Unsurprisingly, Liu Xiang came from an elite family with imperial connections and which may have been distantly related to the first Han emperor, Gaozu.⁴¹² The wealth of Liu Xiang’s upbringing and his later access to the imperial court in his government service afforded him access to a vast number of books, which were luxury items of great value. Liu Xiang’s very early years were surrounded by the intrigues of the regency of several powerful individuals over the Emperor Zhao (昭帝) (r. 87-74 CE). Emperor Zhao had been selected as emperor following the death of Emperor Wu, arguably due to his mother’s lack of powerful family members.⁴¹³ The resulting power struggles created instability in the imperial court and when Emperor Zhao died, a replacement was found in the form of the Prince of Changyi (昌邑王), who was however soon discarded. Liu Xiang’s father, Liu De (劉德), was involved in this power struggle and supported Huo Guang (霍光) in installing Emperor Xuan.⁴¹⁴ However, the Huo family’s power was not to last and Emperor Xuan removed the Huo family from the imperial court. Emperor Wu had introduced Confucianism as ‘the state orthodoxy’ and, as such, it is not surprising Confucian theory had a great influence on Liu Xiang.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² B. Hinsch, ‘Reading *Lienüzhuan* (*Biographies of Women*) Through the Life of Liu Xiang’, *Journal of Asian History* 39.2 (2005), p. 132. *HS* 36.1921, n. 1. It is asserted that Liu Xiang’s grandfather was the grandson of the half-brother of the first Han Dynasty Emperor, Liu Bang. Mou, *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions*, p. 9.

⁴¹³ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 176.

⁴¹⁴ Hinsch, ‘Reading *Lienüzhuan*’, p. 134.

⁴¹⁵ Mou, *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions*, p. 10.

The centralised Han Dynasty imperial court meant that consort families grew in profile. As Kinney has highlighted, the sending of imperial male relatives out from the capital created a power vacuum within the capital, which consort families were more than happy to fill. Emperor Wu sent male relatives away and appointed consort relatives to military positions. The military offered a very solid and threatening powerbase to any ambitious family.⁴¹⁶ In the struggle for influence over the young Emperor Yuan following Emperor Xuan's death, Liu Xiang supported Xiao Wangzhi (蕭望之). Hinsch suggests this may have been in response to his disdain at the sight of the empresses, consort kin and eunuchs who made up the opposing faction.⁴¹⁷ This proved a risky move and it took some time for Liu Xiang's official career to be rehabilitated. The eunuch Shi Xian (石顯), an ally of the consort families Xu and Shi, ensured the removal of opponents, including Liu Xiang. Liu Xiang had suffered personally from the machinations of the imperial court and, specifically, the power of consort families. It is here we touch on the most relevant factor in motivating the creation of the *Lienüzhuan*: the political power of consort clans.

The rapid succession of emperors from 6 CE to 9 CE attests to the volatility of the imperial palace and government. As Hinsch highlights, this was a time of visible decline and not a happy time to serve in government.⁴¹⁸ It was also a time when Confucianism and a passion for ancient traditions were gaining momentum and influencing society and government. A certain conservatism emerged and the *Lienüzhuan*, and its approach to women, arguably fits neatly within this movement. Certainly, Liu Xiang's work is often identified as having been written to rectify the morals of society.⁴¹⁹ The morals of society, as Liu Xiang saw them, likely focused on the moral poison of certain consorts. Ban Gu suggests the following, which indicates a concern with the social status of certain women who became imperial consorts:

Liu Xiang observed vulgarity and licentiousness, and the rise of Empress Zhao 趙 and Lady Wei 衛 from based obscurity and saw this as a transgression of the ritual system. Liu Xiang believed that a ruler's guidance proceeds from the inner to the outer and begins with what is nearby. And so, he collected record of virtuous ladies and chaste women from poems and documents to be a standard for reviving the state and making families prominent, as well as of evil favourites and the destructive, and put them in order as *Lienüzhuan* in eight chapters

⁴¹⁶ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 170

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–1.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴¹⁹ Lu, 'Negative Cultural Images', p. 333.

to warn the son of heaven. And he collected biographies and actions to write *Xinxu* and *Shuoyuan* in a total of fifty chapters and submitted them to the throne.⁴²⁰

向睹俗彌奢淫，而趙、衛之屬起微賤，踰禮制。向以為王教由內及外，自近者始。故採取詩書所載賢妃貞婦，興國顯家可法則，及孽嬖亂亡者，序次為列女傳，凡八篇，以戒天子。及采傳記行事，著新序、說苑凡五十篇奏之。

If the *Lienüzhuan* is a submission to the emperor, then its didactic tone makes sense. To influence the centre of power in the Han Dynasty, use of all literary tools of persuasion would be employed by Liu Xiang.

Emperor Cheng replaced Empress Xu (許皇后) and his Beautiful Companion Ban Jieyu with Empress Zhao (趙) and her sister Beautiful Companion Wei on the grounds that the former empress and companion had been guilty of witchcraft.⁴²¹ Empress Xu was later presented with poison, which she dutifully consumed.⁴²² As Kinney highlights, neither Empress Xu nor Ban Jieyu produced any offspring for the emperor, and this was certainly a factor in their undoing.⁴²³ Another possible factor is Liu Xiang himself. He apparently advised the emperor that the fault for the lack of an heir lay with the Empress Xu.⁴²⁴ Ban Jieyu did give birth to two sons by the emperor; however, they did not survive.⁴²⁵ Unlike Empress Xu, history (that is, Liu Xiang and Ban Gu) tells us that Ban Jieyu was able to extricate herself from her situation through adherence to Confucian virtue. Ban Jieyu recommended another woman to the emperor when she did not produce a (surviving) child, and when charged with witchcraft she sought permission to serve the Empress Dowager.

Ban's attempt to model herself on feminine exemplars from antiquity did not prevent the emperor from preferring the Zhao sisters, but her training in philosophical argumentation and her compliance with Confucian teachings seems to have kept her from harm.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁰ HS 36.1957–8.

⁴²¹ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 222.

⁴²² HS 97B.3983.

⁴²³ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. XXII.

⁴²⁴ HS 97B.3974. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 80.

⁴²⁵ David R. Knechtges, 'The Poetry of an Imperial Concubine: The Favorite Beauty Ban', *Oriens Extremus* 36.2 (1993) p. 128.

⁴²⁶ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. XXII.

The Ban family was clearly erudite and intelligent. It was likely this that provided Ban Jieyu the strategy she employed to ensure her own survival. Thus, by using Confucius' own words in defending herself, Ban Jieyu escaped unharmed—although, as with the accounts of all women in the Han Dynasty, we must be sceptical, especially when presenting Ban Jieyu in a positive light suited both Liu Xiang and her great-nephew, Ban Gu.

The rise of Empress Zhao, a former dancer and a slave, must have shocked the established families in the imperial court.⁴²⁷ It was certainly seen as an insult to the Ban family, as Ban Gu remembered his great-aunt's demotion and replacement by a former slave. Liu Xiang, with his high status and education, appears to have viewed the alien Empress Zhao and her sister as impostors who threatened the fabric of the imperial court and the morality of the Emperor. Liu Xiang was also concerned about the rise of the Wang family in the time of Emperor Cheng and what this would mean for the Liu imperial house.⁴²⁸ Hinsch suggests the *Lienüzhuan* was finished around 16 CE, in the aftermath of this crisis.⁴²⁹

Liu Xiang interpreted women's political behaviours as attracting heaven's displeasure through his readings of natural omens.⁴³⁰ This certainly supports a contention that Liu Xiang was not so keen on women. The class element should not, however, be ignored. The rise of former slaves or low-class women to the imperial palace and, of all places, the position of emperor itself would have been horrifying to traditionalists and to the imperial court with its elite membership. Empress Zhao had started life as a slave and dancing girl. While she demonstrated social mobility within Han Dynasty society, it must have shocked many members of the imperial court with their proud familial histories and sense of general superiority. It is surely no coincidence that the *Lienüzhuan* may have been completed the very year Empress Zhao was made empress.⁴³¹ Whether the text is merely a criticism of Empress Zhao is, however, debatable, considering the history of consort clans and imperial women and the increasing rise of the Wang consort family, who would later take the kingdom and form the Xin Dynasty. Ban Gu includes Liu Xiang's disapprobation of the

⁴²⁷ Women who were singers and dancers were of low status, generally purchased or contracted to provide services to wealthy families See Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 55.

⁴²⁸ Charles Sanft, 'The Moment of Dying: Representations in Liu Xiang's Anthologies *Xin xu* and *Shuo yuan*', *AM*, 3rd ser., 24.1 (2011), p. 157.

⁴²⁹ Hinsch, 'Reading *Lienüzhuan*', p. 149.

⁴³⁰ *HS* 27C2.1517.

⁴³¹ Hinsch, 'Reading *Lienüzhuan*', p. 149.

Wang family on the basis they were increasing in strength and threatened the Liu family.⁴³² Hinsch argues that the Wang family, and not Empress Zhao, were the real threat during Liu Xiang's lifetime and that, on this basis, the *Lienüzhuan* can be viewed as a text disparaging the Wang and their power.

Liu Xiang, as a court official and member of the bureaucracy, was part of a group of individuals directly vying with others at court—including imperial women—for influence over the emperor and government. Emperor Yuan's disinterest in ruling led to a power vacuum many were willing and able to fill. The eunuch Shi Xian allied with the consort families to oust their opponents, and this included Liu Xiang.⁴³³ The approach of Liu Xiang is thus, not surprisingly, a personal and subjective one; he was personally invested in anti-consort rhetoric.

Liu Xiang was interested and engaged in portent studies or omens and often attributed 'inauspicious omens as disruptions of the natural order caused by the misbehaviour of prominent women'.⁴³⁴ Ironically as Liu Xiang elevated the role of women in the cosmic world he also 'made the control of female behaviour an important issue'.⁴³⁵ Liu Xiang was, according to Ban Gu, concerned with the deterioration of customs, mores and ritual practice.⁴³⁶ His influence would be far-reaching for Chinese women; he pioneered stories about women and the underlying themes he wrote about continued to guide Chinese culture long into the future.⁴³⁷

Liu Xiang – author?

The question of whether Liu Xiang was author of the *Lienüzhuan* is complicated. As discussed above, Han Dynasty historical works often suffered from having the appearance of merely recording, rather than analysing, the history they reported. When it comes to Liu Xiang, there is debate as to his status as an author or editor. This issue stems from the fact

⁴³² *HS* 36.1958–62.

⁴³³ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. XIX.

⁴³⁴ Hinsch, 'Reading *Lienüzhuan*', pp. 155–6.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴³⁶ Sanft, 'Dying in Liu Xiang's Anthologies', p. 131.

⁴³⁷ B. Hinsch, 'Cross-Genre Influence on the Fictional Aspects of *Lienü* Narratives. Sanft, 'Dying in Liu Xiang's Anthologies', p. 129.

that many of the stories recounted by Liu Xiang are not original to the *Lienüzhuan*. Hinsch has posited a series of alternatives for Liu Xiang's role in the text:

1. Liu Xiang as an editor;
2. Liu Xiang took past stories and extensively rewrote them to reflect his own ideology;
3. Liu Xiang invented the stories of the *Lienüzhuan*; or
4. *Lienüzhuan* is historical fiction.⁴³⁸

Some argue that the stories contained within the *Lienüzhuan* are 'too detailed' and contain too much historical reality to be fictitious.⁴³⁹ This is a short-sighted approach. Detail is no test for truth in the example of a written text drafted over time. Any reader of an intricate crime novel will attest that detail bears no relationship to whether something is fiction or nonfiction. It is true that many of the women Liu Xiang discusses appear in other historical texts.⁴⁴⁰ Some are semi-mythological characters and others are women who predate Liu Xiang by a mere century.⁴⁴¹

Even at the lowest estimation, Liu Xiang as an editor, as Ban Gu sees it, had a very significant role and influence over the text.⁴⁴² Hinsch notes that authors in the Zhou Dynasty held strong views about widow remarriage and female sequestration; however, even they did not go so far as Liu Xiang in his approval of self-mutilation and suicide to preserve virtue, as seen in chapters 4 and 5 of the *Lienüzhuan*.⁴⁴³ As the Zhou did not proselytise these ideas, Hinsch argues that Liu Xiang must have created them, or elaborated and added to existing stories.⁴⁴⁴ This correctly identifies why the *Lienüzhuan* is so relevant; it is a didactic Han Dynasty text and to see it as anything else (for instance, simply as a record of older stories) is wholly inaccurate. This view takes the same approach to Han Dynasty literature as that often taken when examining Sima Qian or Ban Gu, namely, that compilation does not produce an original text and thus does not contribute to the literary or historical tradition. This view is inadequate when examining early Chinese authorship and its literary tradition.

⁴³⁸ B. Hinsch, 'The Composition of *Lienüzhuan*: Was Liu Xiang the Author or Editor?', *AM*, 3rd ser., 20.1 (2007), p. 2.

⁴³⁹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 24.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Hinsch, 'Composition of *Lienüzhuan*', p. 3. Note that Mou posits Liu Xiang as a compiler, and yet also states 'we have no reason to doubt the biographies were his'. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 28.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

Liu Xiang's *modus operandi*

To a modern western reader, the roles women play within the *Lienüzhuan* can feel restrictive, narrow and unfulfilling. The *Lienüzhuan* was not, however, specifically designed to deprive women of freedoms, individual expression and opportunity. Early Chinese society and culture already prevented such things. The focus of the text was, rather, on preventing issues that had created political imbalance prior to and during Liu Xiang's lifetime. It is important to note here that although the text is often described as a biography, it is anything but. Rather, it provides fantastical stories and these, as Hinsch highlights,

rarely describe major events in the entire life cycle of their subject. Instead they usually focus on a single key event carefully selected to reveal an exemplary woman's general moral character.⁴⁴⁵

Female lives, unlike male ones, warrant only narrow focus, so that a female character's entire life is reduced to one incident (even if that one incident contains a broader moral theme).⁴⁴⁶ Indeed, like Sima Qian, Liu Xiang uses historical characters and biographical writing to investigate larger themes.⁴⁴⁷ There is a utilitarian strain to Liu Xiang's approach. The vying of consort clans for power in the event of an effective emperor had a destabilising effect on government, policy and the imperial family. Liu Xiang must have thought it was far better to have consorts who, rather than promoting their own interests or those of their families, felt bound by a culturally and philosophically unifying force that promoted self-abnegation for consorts. Indeed, Kinney argues that the text is as much a counter to the deleterious effects of lower-class women on the emperor as it is a standard by which the emperor might judge consorts.⁴⁴⁸ In this way, the *Lienüzhuan* is often seen as admonishing the emperor.⁴⁴⁹ The behaviour of consorts to the emperor was of the utmost importance to the Han Dynasty imperial court. It can be said that the *Lienüzhuan* thus has a twofold objective:

1. to counteract the effects of lower-class consorts, who did not have the upbringing required to ensure they 'played by the rules'; and

⁴⁴⁵ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan narratives', p. 41.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁴⁸ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. XVII.

⁴⁴⁹ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 11.

2. to create a prescriptive example which could guide an emperor when he examined and 'graded' consorts or prospective consorts.

As Kinney outlines, a lower-class, or former slave, consort did not have the upbringing that would ensure she undertook her duties appropriately as a helpmate to the supreme ruler.⁴⁵⁰ A more modern reading of this would be that those from the lower classes did not know or apply the same implicit rules as the imperial elite, in whom these normative practices were inculcated from childhood. As such, Liu Xiang's text can be seen to warn against the families of Zhao and Wei, who overstepped their designated place in the hierarchy and rapidly climbed a social ladder of their own creation.⁴⁵¹ There are gendered as well as socio-economic undertones to the *Lienüzhuan*. It questions who legitimately holds power. It is worth noting that Liu Xiang does not engage with *yin* and *yang*. The text contains only two references to *yin* and *yang*, neither of which make an analogy with gender.⁴⁵² That does not mean that the essentialised view of gender does not underpin the *Lienüzhuan*, merely that its emphasis is not made explicit by Liu Xiang.

Imperial marriage and imperial concubine/consort relationships were not an avenue for female self-gratification or self-fulfilment. This may occasionally have been a pleasant by-product, but individualism itself was not desirable or celebrated by Han Dynasty culture. The imperial consort was an essential component of dynastic stability.⁴⁵³ The relatives of any imperial woman needed to be illustrious but not too powerful. Powerful natal relatives were frequently viewed as likely to destabilise the imperial equilibrium. It was easy to create power vacuums which natal relatives would fill, as Emperor Wu did when he sent male relatives from the capital and appointed consort kin to military posts.⁴⁵⁴ As such, consort families were generally powerful and rendered more powerful once a member became empress.⁴⁵⁵

The Han Dynasty had certain characteristics that arguably made it vulnerable to any destabilising effect consort kin might have. These include:

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. xvii–xviii.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. xvii.

⁴⁵² Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, pp. 47, 162.

⁴⁵³ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. xviii.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., p. xix.

⁴⁵⁵ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 211.

- a centralised empire with one imperial family and an accompanying elite all based in the capital (as opposed to the decentralised state system, where women travelled without their families for marriage);
- provision of roles for male relatives of the emperor on the frontier or otherwise decentralised (e.g. residing in their own fiefdom); and
- an expanded bureaucracy that increased the number of elite, educated and wealthy families in the capital (who in turn might seek to set their daughters upon the political ladder of the imperial harem).

The vacuum that centralisation created meant that consort clans rose to power and it is the moral fibre of consorts to the emperor Liu Xiang wishes to address.

Liu Xiang's work and the example it provided were also responsible for the production of many biographies of women throughout Chinese history.⁴⁵⁶ Hinsch quite rightly points out that those reading the *Lienüzhuan* should not expect a realistic account of female existence. Rather the text aims to 'provide archetypes of ideal female moral behaviour'.⁴⁵⁷ It is ideology, and not reality, which permeates Liu Xiang's text and his purpose in writing it.

Liu Xiang's work constructed a normative standard for womanhood, and this did not impact solely on consort women. There is a consistency between Liu Xiang's work and the Confucian ideals, which had set the standard so much earlier.⁴⁵⁸ Liu Xiang created a new genre in historical writing, one that permeated down the ages in Chinese historiography.⁴⁵⁹ Through the stories he edited, created and re-created, Liu Xiang provided the template of what women should be and how they should behave.⁴⁶⁰ Although this template curtailed behaviour, it also provided acceptable ways women could behave to merit praise and status. That is, to reference Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, social

⁴⁵⁶ Hinsch, 'Reading *Lienüzhuan*', p. 129. Mann 'Presidential Address', p. 838. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, pp. 16–7. Mou makes an interesting comparison between Liu Xiang's text and Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, stating that despite the two texts being written some 1300 years apart and emanating from different cultural contexts, 'both represent a conscious male endeavor to appropriate women from antiquity to shortly before their own times'. Considering that Boccaccio's work is often viewed as the first western collection of biographies of women, the comparison may be a positive reflection of Chinese cultural and literary development.

⁴⁵⁷ Hinsch, 'Reading *Lienüzhuan*', pp. 120–30.

⁴⁵⁸ Robin Wang, 'Virtue 德 (*de*), Talent 才 (*cai*), and Beauty 色 (*se*): Authoring a Full-fledged Womanhood in *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳 (*Biographies of Women*)', in P.D. Herschok and R.T. Annes (eds.), *Confucian Cultures of Authority*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 94.

⁴⁵⁹ Lu, 'Negative Cultural Images', p. 333.

⁴⁶⁰ Wang, 'Womanhood in *Lienüzhuan*', p. 93.

roles for women may be restrictive while providing an ‘appropriate context in which women’s own dignity and self-worth still stand fully fledged’.⁴⁶¹ Wang has argued that the *Lienüzhuan* offered women a way to assert themselves within the family. Furthermore, the choices women must make in Liu Xiang’s stories are serious ones and frequently involve the highest sacrifice, that of their own lives.⁴⁶² For example, Jienu (羈奴) sacrifices herself to prevent the use of her father as a hostage to extort information from her about her husband.⁴⁶³ Her action is significant in every way and is imbued with the highest virtue.

The text also emphasises inner beauty over external attractiveness. That is, plain or ugly women can inspire love because of their wisdom and intelligence.⁴⁶⁴ In what might appear as a hedonistic world for emperors with access to an imperial harem, the attraction of a focus on character as the value of a woman is clear. Women who subordinate themselves, not necessarily to men but to philosophical ideals, which provide strictures on behaviour, are found in the *Lienüzhuan*.⁴⁶⁵ All humans, even women, must live not only according to each other but in accordance with the right way.

Thus, Liu Xiang does not assume that women are incapable. Rather, Wang argues the *Lienüzhuan* appreciates women’s capabilities and autonomy.⁴⁶⁶ The stories retold envisage a path for women to moral authority.⁴⁶⁷ The view is informed by the stories in which women influence male morality through their own superior morals. It is possible that, although seemingly providing women with a path to autonomy and respect, the *Lienüzhuan* uses a series of stories about women to comment on male behaviours and critique male decisions. As a result, the *Lienüzhuan* was universally instructional and not just aimed at or for women. The text seeks to change the way that men see women, probably even more than it does to change the way women viewed themselves. As an offering to the emperor, the *Lienüzhuan* was clearly a communication to men to enable them to see the value of virtuous female behaviour and its importance. That the *Lienüzhuan* might also influence female behaviour would likely be a bonus for Liu Xiang.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. 100.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

Female rhetorical skill emerges as a key element in the *Lienüzhuan*. It is through their eloquence that many women in the *Lienüzhuan* intervene on their male counterpart's behalf.⁴⁶⁸ Indeed, as Wang comments, '[t]he rhetorical skills established by these women would be the envy of any scholar appointed to male appeal in a court of law'.⁴⁶⁹ One essential factor of womanhood in the *Lienüzhuan* is that women have moral agency and possess rational minds. A woman who enters a male sphere for a short time is 'filling the void', so to speak, when men do not, will not or cannot act. Similarly, while women do instruct men or admonish them,

a filial wife, however, may criticise her husband's political acts but she will never completely assume his authority.⁴⁷⁰

Unlike the way in which a son will inevitably fill his father's shoes, a woman does not pose this threat in a society where such defined gendered roles and spaces exist.

If anything is clear from Liu Xiang's context and his own writing, it is that the *Lienüzhuan* is about four things: Liu Xiang's own world view, the emperor, how men should view women and how a woman should behave.

The *Lienüzhuan* contains 125 exemplary life stories of various women.⁴⁷¹ Liu Xiang's women are classified into six chapters of virtue and a seventh chapter for villainous women.⁴⁷² The *Lienüzhuan* might be understood as a catalogue or manual through which the emperor might read and thereby imbibe its notions. Being a woman can be considered a performative act. Similarly, Liu Xiang's women are characters performing within his text. The approach to the woman in each story is similarly formulaic.

Raphals identifies four components in each story:

1. An introduction containing genealogical information, a brief statement of virtues and a brief assessment of the woman's actions.
2. One or more incidents in the woman's life which merit attention (generally containing virtuous behaviour).
3. An assessment of the life story.
4. A eulogy or song summarising the virtuous deeds and listing the woman's virtues.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁷⁰ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. xxix.

⁴⁷¹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 20.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

That each story in the *Lienüzhuan* broadly complies with this three/four component structure means Liu Xiang is likely an author more than an editor. As an author, he is able to, and does, use works that have preceded him, but there is no prohibition on an author retelling earlier mythological tales within part of a greater work.

Raphals promotes the idea that heroisation has occurred in the *Lienüzhuan*, as follows:

1. Transformation of a 'common' individual;
2. Autodidacticism (the absence of a teacher);
3. The decisive role of chance in the event or encounter that sparks transformation;
4. The view that nature rather than a teacher is worthy of imitation; and
5. The discovery of talent and the subsequent rise in social standing of the individual.⁴⁷⁴

Raphals provides here an interesting perspective through which the *Lienüzhuan* may be viewed. The heroisation process above it has much application to many of the individual stories within the *Lienüzhuan*, in which the female characters are:

1. of low status;
2. without any teacher;
3. yet when chance provides them an opportunity (or a stage);
4. they perform admirably;
5. which results in an improvement in their situation (or the offer of such, which they may refuse).

In the heroisation process there is an emphasis on pure talent or pure virtue. Without being told, or perhaps overly influenced, by society, the individual whom one would least expect does the right thing. Thus, Raphals says the women in the *Lienüzhuan* who are not imperial or royal often exercise 'highly moralised skills against (or for the benefit of) hierarchical superiors'.⁴⁷⁵ This sets them apart from male counterparts, who are themselves actors within the hierarchy.⁴⁷⁶ Women in the *Lienüzhuan* are the supporting cast in a male world.

Returning to heroisation, it is as Raphals identifies a *topos*; there is no conceivable universe in which so many women so neatly fit into the same mould. Rather, the female characters have been cast similarly using the same process and theory. Thus, if not already obvious for

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

other reasons, much of the *Lienüzhuan* cannot be considered nonfiction. Raphals identifies organisation and emphasis in Liu Xiang's work even when using stories which existed in earlier texts.⁴⁷⁷

The *Lienüzhuan* marks (as Hinsch hints at above) an increasing conservatism in gender discourse for the Han Dynasty. It is apparent Liu Xiang has edited and emphasised the role of women for good or bad. The text is not an 'accurate' representation of historical Chinese, or arguably even widespread contemporary Han Dynasty, views. Through use of a third-person narrative interrupted with dialogue direct from the characters throughout, Liu Xiang maintains the reader's interest and inserts rhetorical virtue into their mouths.⁴⁷⁸ Confucian tales in which heroic male underlings raise difficult issues with their superiors at great personal risk influenced Liu Xiang in his tales.⁴⁷⁹ His female characters are often imbued with moral authority in such examples, where they remind a superior of the correct way. This does elevate women and what they say, giving their words higher moral value.

Previous limitations that would prevent a woman from informing a superior of the right way to act (as seen in Confucianism prior to Liu Xiang) do not exist for Liu Xiang. In the *Lienüzhuan* he imbues female characters with moral strength and value. Each woman and each virtue demonstrated has a place in a Confucian social hierarchy.⁴⁸⁰ Further, he places women as vital instructors of their children. Kinney and Raphals have identified that this is a divergence from a prior trend in which fathers are the vital instructors.⁴⁸¹ Considering the prominence of the mother of Mengzi, perhaps this is not surprising.

The narrow biographies are concise in their contents and often include only one narrative element.⁴⁸² They do not recount a woman's life for its own sake but, rather, as part of a broader discussion of female virtue. Rather than biographies, each chapter uses what purports to be an individual's real-life story for the purpose of stereotyping women according to their relationship to men, namely as daughter, wife or mother.⁴⁸³ Liu Xiang has no need for the entire biography of a woman or for personal insight into the individual's emotional

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁷⁸ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan Narratives', p. 45.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁸⁰ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 31.

⁴⁸¹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 21. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, pp. 26–7 and 31–2.

⁴⁸² Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 23.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 24.

perspective. Rather, part of a woman's life—often a single incident—is sufficient for his purpose. Raphals maintains that the incidents are too detailed and particular to suggest a simple process of stereotyping.⁴⁸⁴ This ignores the subtle and yet powerfully persuasive effect of amending details of even a 'true' story to suit an agenda and present a specific message about women. The process and effect of stereotyping need not be crass and clumsy, else could not be so pervasive. Similarly, it was necessarily part of the patriarchal structure that seemingly powerful women took actions to maintain Confucian moral agenda.⁴⁸⁵

Rather than accept Hinsch's four options as mutually exclusive alternatives, the more sensible path is that they exist simultaneously. Liu Xiang moulded the *Lienüzhuan*. It is also clear that he used historical myths or stories and embellished them as he wished. Other stories are inventions of his own making and, finally, the entire *Lienüzhuan* is tinted with the shades of historical fiction. Clearly, the *Lienüzhuan* is not recording women's lives for their own benefit, to reveal a subjective truth about female experience.⁴⁸⁶ For Liu Xiang, these women are a means to an end. Liu Xiang has an agenda and he crafts a variety of female characters to suit his plot. In so doing, he employs a formulaic structure which is unnatural and does not reflect the vicissitudes of life. Arguably, however, the exact role of Liu Xiang is a secondary issue to that of what the text communicates to its audience.

What virtues are extolled and to what purpose?

A key theme of Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan* is that women should not be jealous of their male companion's attachments to other women. Wives should encourage and manage their husband's harem of concubines. In this way, Liu Xiang demonstrates that a purportedly positive text that praises women can be a highly effective negative coercive force on women. Women are literary tools in the cultural war Liu Xiang wages; they are reduced to minions of his didactic text. Thus 'what is in focus in Liu Xiang's biographies is not the women themselves, but their deeds'.⁴⁸⁷ Significantly, the *Hanshu* indicates that Liu Xiang's text offers advice and a warning to Emperor Cheng against allowing too much female influence

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Mann, 'President Address', p. 842.

⁴⁸⁶ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 26.

⁴⁸⁷ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 29. Note that Mou finds comparisons between the *Lienüzhuan* and the prescriptions of Confucius for the gentleman scholar. Further, Mou states that many of the virtues of a Confucian gentleman are found in Liu Xiang's women.

in statecraft.⁴⁸⁸ Certainly Liu Xiang's text assumes that women can affect the world around them; they can have an active role in their own lives, the lives of others and, ultimately, the imperial court.⁴⁸⁹

The subjugation of female interests and desires behind those of their male counterparts clearly demonstrates two things:

1. the double standard for gender in Han Dynasty China; and
2. for a wealthy man (and an imperial one) several women were legitimately available to him not only for sex but also for provision of an heir.

In a system in which many women were available and any one of them could produce a legitimate heir, the value and importance of individual women is reduced. Scarcity is often seen in economics as a driver of value in the marketplace. If something is scarce, its price increases; conversely, if there is and supply outstrips demand the price will fall. Similarly, the vast number of women to whom the emperor had access reduced the value of women generally. This can be contrasted with a Roman imperial model, where an emperor might sleep with whomever he wished but, ultimately, it was only a child of his one lawful wife who would inherit the throne. In both instances, however, women are too frequently reduced to being providers of an heir.

While the female gender was of course necessary to the imperial system, the various options available to an emperor indicates that individual women suffered from being essentially replaceable. This is vastly different from a system in which one wife alone could at any time produce a legitimate heir (such as the contemporary Roman culture or later imperial systems throughout Europe). Returning briefly to economic principles of supply and demand, for men of high-status Han Dynasty imperial women were too numerous to retain high value. The system also did not care by whom an heir was produced on the female side, which also devalued imperial women. Considering this, and the importance of reverence for the elderly, it is hardly surprising that greater power could come from a situation in which one's male 'husband' was absent, and a woman had reached older age, i.e. a widow ruling as regent or an empress dowager.

⁴⁸⁸ HS 36.1957–60. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 19.

⁴⁸⁹ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 30.

It is significant that Liu Xiang does not consistently refer to women by name; while he does sometimes use a woman's name (particularly in longer stories), he more commonly uses a reference to their place in the family structure or a family epithet to identify them. Throughout the *Lienüzhuan* Liu Xiang refers to and quotes from the *Book of Odes*. This places Liu Xiang as part of the Confucian conservatism that took hold during the Han Dynasty. The *Lienüzhuan* is concerned with women, or at least this is what we are led to believe, but is this the case? The inversion would be that the text is concerned with men or Confucianism, and male or Confucian interests. It is true that the text is just as concerned with men as it is with women. More accurately, and by way of middle ground, the text is concerned with gender relations. As can be seen in the text, Han women are defined by their relationship to men. Han Dynasty men are defined in relation to both men and women. It is only in this equation that Han Dynasty men benefit from 'better treatment'.

Chapter Seven. ‘Woman’ in the *Lienüzhuan* (列女傳)

Liu Xiang’s text contains numerous stories focused on women and their interactions. Many of Liu Xiang’s women demonstrate power, often in different ways, frequently through strength of character (through adherence to virtue) which results in influence on the world around them. Liu Xiang’s text was divided into seven chapters, with a group of supplementary biographies:

- 1 Matronly Models (母儀)
- 2 The Worthy and the Enlightened (賢明)⁴⁹⁰
- 3 The Benevolent and the Wise (仁智)⁴⁹¹
- 4 The Chaste and Obedient (貞順)
- 5 The Principled and Righteous (節義)
- 6 The Accomplished Speakers (辯通)
- 7 Depraved Favourites (孽嬖)
- 8 Supplementary Biographies (續列女).

The first six chapters of the *Lienüzhuan* addresses ‘good’ conduct and the seventh ‘bad’ conduct.⁴⁹² Mou has noted that only Chapter One and Chapter Four have titles that are gender- or female-specific, indicating that Liu Xiang used Confucian ideals generally applied to men in discussing women.⁴⁹³ It is worth noting the text does not, in fact, contain biographies but, rather, short sketches detailing one or two incidents in a woman’s life.⁴⁹⁴

This thesis, rather than unhelpfully mirroring this division, will consider the four major roles or locations in which we find women in the *Lienüzhuan*:

1. Women as assistants
2. Women as self-interested
3. Women as paragons of virtue and morality
4. Women in their rightful place.

⁴⁹⁰ Raphals highlights that *xian ming* was not an expression invented by Liu Xiang but, rather, a term which had worthy and elite connotations. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 28.

⁴⁹¹ Raphals explores the usage of *ren zhi* to describe sages, princes and virtuous conduct or counsel. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 28.

⁴⁹² Mou, *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions*, p. 12.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

Within these roles there are a couple of recurrent themes, the most obvious being that women should sacrifice themselves, in whatever way necessary to communicate Liu Xiang's argument for dynastic stability, which demands the sacrifice of all. It is significant that very few of Liu Xiang's women are unmarried; that is, all the women in his text are subject to one of the most important kinship relationships.⁴⁹⁵ Liu Xiang brought violent self-sacrifice, which had been on the periphery and generally had negative connotations, to the fore of mainstream culture for women.⁴⁹⁶

Within Liu Xiang's roles for women there are two core theses throughout his texts:

- Virtue is primary, above even life, and must be preserved at all costs; and
- Selflessness is a primary display of virtue (that is, honouring duties owed to others in preference to those you owe yourself or your loved ones).

In discussing his themes and presenting women in their roles, Liu Xiang consistently inverts the gender and social hierarchy by giving women of lower status great virtue, to teach men. Nevertheless, the text is elite in its focus; that is, the elite class is the predominant focus and provides most characters.⁴⁹⁷ The *Lienüzhuan* is primarily a text for men and specifically the emperor, to ensure he surrounded himself with women of the correct moral fibre. It has the side-effect of also creating normative standards for women surrounding the emperor.

It is worth noting that in spending such time and effort on the standards of female behaviour, Liu Xiang makes explicit the political role women played in the Han Dynasty system. If Han Dynasty elite women were not political they would never have attracted Liu Xiang's undivided attention. Liu Xiang also does elevate women in some ways and provides them clear intellectual integrity and capability.⁴⁹⁸

I. Women as Assistants to Men

Through his chapter on motherhood, Liu Xiang extols the role of mothers as instructors of their sons. This elevates female importance; as a good mother creates a good son, women are to assist and enable men to be great. This chapter explores the model behaviour expected

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 31. Mou states there are only two women who are not married or do not marry during their biography.

⁴⁹⁶ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan Narratives', p. 51.

⁴⁹⁷ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 33. Mou's numerical analysis of the status of the women in the *Lienüzhuan* reveals that a high proportion are nobles (that is, 46 out of 104).

⁴⁹⁸ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 27.

of women within the family sphere, particularly in the influence they have over sons. The contents of the *Lienüzhuan* constitute a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it elevates women, specifically mothers, as vitally important to their son's upbringing. On the other hand, it blames women for the failings of a son or a male counterpart. Confucian tales in which heroic male underlings raise difficult issues with their superiors at great personal risk influenced Liu Xiang in his tales.⁴⁹⁹ His female characters are often imbued with moral authority in such examples, where they remind a superior of the correct way.⁵⁰⁰ Mou has considered such examples had a frequent occurrence due to women viewing their personal lives through the prism of public affairs.⁵⁰¹ Women in the *Lienüzhuan* often admonish, criticise and rebuke to improve a man's actions or to teach a man.⁵⁰² In this way, Liu Xiang asserts that 'everything a woman does is aimed at promoting the lives of her male relatives'.⁵⁰³

Raphals sees four distinct roles women inhabit to assist men:

1. Teachers who instruct in skills and values;
2. Sagacious women who advise their husbands and others on matters of state, office and personal morality;
3. Prescient women who discern the course of future events and attempt to save their family or others from disaster; and
4. Counsellors who advise hierarchical superiors.⁵⁰⁴

Certainly, in their role as assistants to men, there are distinct ways in which women help their male counterparts. In almost all situations women are advising a superior. It is, perhaps, more accurate than to say that numbers one to three above are in fact subcategories of number four. All of Liu Xiang's best women are helpmates to male superiors. Liu Xiang presents models of maternal virtue to inspire in his readers—most particularly, the emperor—submission to the teachings of a worthy female teacher.

1.3 Jian Di, Mother of Xie (卷一之三契母簡狄)

⁴⁹⁹ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan Narratives', p. 46.

⁵⁰⁰ Raphals, *Sharing the light*, p. 27.

⁵⁰¹ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 45. This conflation of the private and public spheres may result from the influence of Confucian texts in the new style of work Liu Xiang was creating.

⁵⁰² Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 27.

⁵⁰³ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 67.

⁵⁰⁴ Raphals, *Sharing the light*, p. 28.

Jian Di in *zhuan* 1.3 is the cause of her son Xie's (契) successes as Assistant to the Ruler.⁵⁰⁵ While many stories regarding Xie focus on his own unusual birth and the rules for ordering society that he promoted, Liu Xiang focuses on Jian Di and places her as the source of Xie's greatness.⁵⁰⁶ Similarly, Liu Xiang says of Tu Shan (塗山) and her son,

His mother alone taught him the right order and precedence in human relationships. She instructed him to be good and in the end he succeeded his father.⁵⁰⁷

啟母塗山，維配帝禹，辛壬癸甲，禹往敷土，啟呱呱泣，母獨論序，教訓以善，卒繼其父。

Most of the stories revolve around women who are widowed or left alone by their husbands who are attending some urgent business, and, as in Tu Shan's case, instruct their sons alone. The role of mother is certainly one that Liu Xiang elevates within the *Lienüzhuan*.

1.7 Ding Jiang, Mother in law of Wei (卷一之七衛姑定姜)

Ding Jiang was married to the Duke Ding of Wei (衛定公).⁵⁰⁸ Her son died prematurely and her kindness to her daughter-in-law and service to Duke Ding were recorded by Liu Xiang. Ding Jiang perceives the faults of her husband's designated heir and tries, unsuccessfully, to influence the succession and establish a worthier younger brother.⁵⁰⁹ Through Ding Jiang, Liu Xiang damns the new Duke Xian of Wei on three counts.⁵¹⁰ Significantly, one is his treatment of Ding Jiang as his father's widow. Liu Xiang says Duke Xian (獻公) was cruel and violent, treating Ding Jian contemptuously.⁵¹¹ Through attempting to counteract her husband's faults both during his life and after his death, Ding Jiang in some ways does undermine the authority of men. This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the

⁵⁰⁵ LNZ 1.3; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 19–20. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 4.

⁵⁰⁶ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 30. Note the unusual conception of Xie in LNZ 1.3; Mou states the mythical elements confer supernatural power on the beginning of the patriarchal line and are indicative of the sanction of heaven. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 37.

⁵⁰⁷ LNZ 1.4; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 21. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 5.

⁵⁰⁸ LNZ 1.7; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 26–7. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 8.

⁵⁰⁹ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 26–7. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 30.

⁵¹⁰ LNZ 1.7; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 27. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 8. Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 150.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

Lienüzhuan; women frequently improve men or outperform them when it comes to moral standing. Tellingly, in the tale of Ding Jiang, Duke Xian does recover rule of his dukedom.⁵¹²

1.11 Mother of Mengzi of Zuo (卷一之九鄒孟軻母)

Liu Xiang recalls the very significant influence of Meng Mu (孟母), mother of Mengzi (Mencius), upon her son.⁵¹³ Unsurprisingly, many of the most virtuous women charged with the care of their sons are widows like Meng Mu. Widows are exalted because they are, as Mann has described them, trustees of male progeny.⁵¹⁴ Meng Mu moved houses so that her son would receive good influences from a neighbouring school.⁵¹⁵ The most famous example is that of Meng Mu cutting a piece of cloth she was part way through weaving to demonstrate the waste of Mengzi abandoning his studies.⁵¹⁶ There is an analogy between weaving and studying here, but the underlying theme is that one must be persistent and dedicated in life. Dedication and persistence are protectors against misfortune in an unpredictable world.⁵¹⁷

Mengzi's mother is an exemplar of maternal devotion and excellence. Whether it finds expression through moving to a new house to ensure her son is near a good influence or demonstrating wasted effort through her spinning, and then ensuring proper etiquette through knocking before a man enters a wife's chamber (the true irony being Mengzi's displeasure at finding his wife undressed!), Meng Mu is always on hand to provide guidance to her son. As in Tu Shan's example, Liu Xiang states that it was Meng Mu who through her instruction and devotion made Mengzi the man he was.⁵¹⁸

Most telling of all is the example of Mengzi's displeasure upon discovering his wife disrobed upon entering her private room.⁵¹⁹ This is perhaps most revealing for the insight it offers into the functioning of a household. While wealthy families often had female chambers upstairs (meaning women's movement was potentially restricted, as they had to exit and enter through places their male family members would observe), it is interesting that within a family a man's entrance to his wife's chamber would ideally be announced. Mengzi's mother

⁵¹² LNZ 1.7; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 28.

⁵¹³ LNZ 1.11.

⁵¹⁴ Mann, 'Presidential Address', p. 842.

⁵¹⁵ LNZ 1.11; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 39. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 18.

⁵¹⁶ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 40. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 34.

⁵¹⁷ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 34.

⁵¹⁸ LNZ 1.11; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 40. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 18.

⁵¹⁹ LNZ 1.11; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 41.

suggests raising one's voice, asking who is within or lowering one's eyes before entering.⁵²⁰ This was, of course, a practice only the elite and landholding classes could uphold. The imperial court would have been fully equipped and committed to such etiquette and announcements.

The disappointment of Mengzi highlights a very significant difference between modern western marriage and marriage in Han Dynasty China. Without being too risqué, in many contemporary cultures today it would probably be absurd if a man was disappointed to walk in on his wife in a state of undress. However, the Han Dynasty approach to social and familial relationships meant marriages were viewed very differently. Marriage might be described as a more practical and less romantic state of life, filled with Confucian duty just like every other aspect of life. A second point is that Mengzi and his wife had separate chambers, a fact already known to us regarding Han Dynasty convention. This reinforces the separate existences of the genders not only outside of marriage but also within the marital relationship.

Han Dynasty marriage was vastly different from modern western expectations, where love is considered the primary and preferable foundation, thus insuring a kind of intimacy in which knocking and finding a partner undressed doesn't make much sense. The incident does, however, make it clear that although there were female spaces, these again offered a double-edged sword. They protected female privacy and created arguable havens for women within the household while, on the other hand, limiting female space and segregating the genders even within the family. As has been seen, virtue and uprightness in the Han Dynasty meant segregation of men and women even within the home.

Mengzi's wife apologises for her laziness in not being dressed and offers to leave the house. It is only Mengzi's mother who rectifies the situation by pointing out that Mengzi should have knocked and called out before entering his wife's chambers. As Liu Xiang refers to it, presumably this separation had application to the Han Dynasty. It is interesting to compare the incident with Mengzi's wife with that in *Lienüzhuan* 2.1 regarding Queen Jiang (姜后) and her husband King Xuan of Zhou (周宣王). Queen Jiang enters her husband's chamber in this way: first she blows out the candle, then in the middle of the room she removes her

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

court clothes, remaining dressed in an undergarment.⁵²¹ She then leaves the following morning. Han Dynasty sexual relations, then, have their correct location and time.

Meng Mu relevantly states the proper conduct of women and observes that,

[t]his means that it does not belong to the women to determine anything herself but she has three obediences. Therefore, when young, she has to obey her parents; when married, she has to obey her husband; when her husband is dead, she obeys her son.⁵²²

以言婦人無擅制之義。而有三從之道也。故年少則從乎父母，出嫁則從乎夫，夫死則從乎子，禮也

This appears to be a clear statement from Meng Mu, or rather Liu Xiang, on what women are: supporting players in the film of life. However, Meng Mu's own conduct indicates that, certainly in the case of her interactions with her son, she often is not the one to obey but rather to lead; by example and through instruction on the correct behaviours. This as a life path leaves little room for self-fulfilment (the modern western fascination) but we should not expect to find such sentiment in Han Dynasty China, with its commitment to self-sacrifice to filial piety, hierarchies and correct behaviours.

Two mothers in the first chapter of the *Lienüzhuan* reprimanded their sons because of their behaviour. Ji of Lu (魯季) reprimanded her son for not doing things himself and the mother of Zifa (子發) reprimanded her son, the general, for eating better than his troops.⁵²³ So, on the one hand, women obeyed men but, on the other hand, women instructed men; it was the position of mother that perhaps varied the most between the two.

In *Lienüzhuan* 1.12 on the Mother Teacher of the State of Lu (卷一之十二魯之母師), the female character outlines that it is not generally accepted conduct for a woman to leave her husband's house.⁵²⁴ In the situation at hand, the woman's family did not know the rites and so required her guidance and attendance; she asks her nine sons' permission (a request that

⁵²¹ LNZ 2.1; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 50. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 25.

⁵²² LNZ 1.11; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 42. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 18. It is worth noting that the translation of *cong* (從) as 'to obey' is problematic here. Mothers have a role in teaching sons, as demonstrated by Mother Meng. It is arguable that *cong* here instead denotes the physical attachment of a woman to a man. A mother thus follows her son and resides physically with him in the event of the death of her husband. Lily Xiao Hong Lee, *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women* (Broadway, Australia: Wild Peony 1994) p. 49, n. 8.

⁵²³ LNZ 1.9 and 1.10; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 30–9. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, pp. 12–6.

⁵²⁴ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 43.

seems a formality rather than one of real authorisation) and leaves the house. This incident and the formality of receiving her sons' permission reveals that codified practices or customs were often undermined by the reality of familial dynamics and the importance of seniority of years in a society which, while patriarchal, was also ageist. Liu Xiang conflates mothers and teachers to great effect in his text, elevating mothers from merely a familial role to a societal one.⁵²⁵

In Chapter Two, three stories are particularly interesting in considering gender constructs. One is 2.2, Ji of Wei, Wife of Duke Huan of Qi (卷二之二齊桓衛姬). In this story, Ji's future husband plans to attack the State of Wei. Ji begs Duke Huan through signs of supplication, such as the removal of earrings and hairpins, not to attack Wei. The Duke of Huan apparently desists and does not attack Wei. This is an example of a woman (inferior) through speech and action urging a male (superior) to refrain from violence or some other action.⁵²⁶ Indeed, Ji's actions result in her elevation to the status of legal wife of Duke Huan.⁵²⁷ Further, he places her in charge of the inner apartments.⁵²⁸ Liu Xiang provides rewards to female characters who act to the greater good in their relations with men. The story also reveals the intimacy between husband and wife, as Ji apparently learns of her husband's plans to attack Wei due to the movement of his feet and raised voice. Even in the Han Dynasty concept of marriage, there were things a wife might know about her husband that others would not.

Further,

the Duke Huan declares that he relied upon Ji to manage the inner quarters and Gong Zhong to manage public affairs. The Duke declared,

Though I am dim-witted, it will be sufficient to establish me in the world.⁵²⁹

夫人治內，管仲治外。寡人雖愚，足以立於世矣。

The story is relevant because it demonstrates the restricted tools available to women to influence decision-making. The removal of earrings and hairpins is hardly any sort of direct power. On the other hand, the story demonstrates the vital importance of interstate marriage

⁵²⁵ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 34.

⁵²⁶ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan Narratives', p. 49.

⁵²⁷ LNZ 2.2; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 51. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 27.

⁵²⁸ LNZ 2.2; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 52. An alternative translation to 'dim-witted' is 'unwise'.

⁵²⁹ LNZ 2.2; trans. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 27.

during this period. Women, through marriages, were political actors and a political investment for their home states.

2.3 Jiang of Qi, Wife of Duke Wen of Jin (卷二之三晉文齊姜)

In this story, Duke Wen's father had taken a concubine who slandered and killed the crown prince. After this incident, Duke Wen fled to another state and was then married Jiang.⁵³⁰ Jiang killed a servant of Duke Wen after discovering from the servant that the duke's uncle was planning to leave the kingdom. It appears that she killed the servant for speaking and spreading news of the plan to leave and retake Jin. Jiang talked to Duke Wen to convince him to return to the State of Jin and reclaim the throne. The duke was stubborn and preferred to die, at which point Jiang directs him to continue.⁵³¹ The directness of Jiang as written by Liu Xiang is startling; Duke Wen did not want to reclaim his throne, so Jiang and the duke's uncle made plans without him. They made him intoxicated with liquor and carried him off to Jin.⁵³² Jiang and Fan organised everything for Duke Wen's return. This action appears shocking in terms of the scale of female agency involved.

The plan was successful, and Duke Wen was enthroned. Liu Xiang comments that Jiang was noble and just. In the event of a husband's lack of ambition to reclaim a throne which Liu Xiang presents as rightfully his, it is his wife who must carry the burden in his place. Liu Xiang allows female political action in special circumstances in aid of a husband, albeit a wife who nevertheless stands behind her husband in effecting the natural order of things. The righteous Duke Wen, in preference to Duke Xian and his 'destructive' concubine Li Ji (驪姬) should have been ruler and it is therefore legitimate for Jiang to assist and push her husband in this regard.⁵³³ As with Ji above in *Lienüzhuan* 2.2, Jiang here is rewarded by becoming the wife of Duke Wen.

This story is perhaps one of the most unusual in the *Lienüzhuan*, in that Jiang takes very decisive action and that action renders her husband a drunk and inert puppet. It is strange, then, that Liu Xiang praises her actions, when in other instances such action would merit

⁵³⁰ LNZ 2.3.

⁵³¹ LNZ 2.3; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 53. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 28.

⁵³² LNZ 2.3; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 53.

⁵³³ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 100, highlights many of the detailed arguments of Jiang which are included in the story of Jiang as recounted in the Guo Yu (國語).

censure. Jiang subverts her husband's autonomy completely and yet her actions are sanctioned by Liu Xiang.

3.3 *The Wife of Duke Mu of Xu* (卷三之三許穆夫人)

In *Lienüzhuan* 3.3, Liu Xiang enhanced the role of the Wife of the Duke Mu to create a story that better suited his agenda of female wisdom. The wife of the Duke Mu is also the daughter of Duke Yi of Wei (衛懿公) and it is her father in the story who does not listen to her advice to marry her to a powerful ruler. Instead, he marries her to the Duke Mu of Xu. By not following this female wisdom the Duke Yi loses his kingdom, as Duke Mu is unable to help Duke Yi when Wei is attacked. The Wife of Duke Mu is given a long and elaborate speech created by Liu Xiang.⁵³⁴ The story reveals more than just Liu Xiang's artistic licence; it also demonstrates that marriages were political alliances, which could provide implied security pacts or agreements and that women could, and indeed their job was to, approach their husbands to assist their natal family.⁵³⁵

1.6 *The Three Matriarchs of the House of Zhou* (卷一之六周室三母)

In *Lienüzhuan* 1.6 Tai Ren (太任), while pregnant with King Wen of Zhou (周文王), undertakes a course of prenatal education. That is, she hears and sees no evil and only eats meat that is cut the right way. She produces an upright and correct child who would surpass all others in talent and virtue. This demonstrates the key role women have as assistants to their male offspring.⁵³⁶ There are, after all, no stories where a female child is provided prenatal education. Prenatal education or foetal instruction does imbue pregnant women with much influence over the foetus, while simultaneously restricting their actions.⁵³⁷ It is women who serve men and thereby increase men's standing, be they husbands or, as in this case, a male foetus. Liu Xiang certainly does elevate the significance of women's actions throughout life.

⁵³⁴ Hinsch, 'Composition of *Lienüzhuan*', p. 13.

⁵³⁵ Mou places it higher, as women taking actions generally inappropriate for women, for instance the wife here provides advice regarding her marriage to her father in the manner of a political consultant of the duke rather than a demure daughter. Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 44.

⁵³⁶ Oliver Weingarten, 'Confucius and Pregnant Women: An Investigation into the Intertextuality of the 'Lunyu'', *JAOS* 129.4 (2009), p. 609.

⁵³⁷ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 22. Raphals states Tai Ren's tale is in *LNZ* 1.5, but it is within *LNZ* 1.6 in O'Hara, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 20, and Kinney, *Exemplary Women* p. 7.

5.10 *The Loyal Concubine of the Master of Zhou* (卷五之十周主忠妾)

Liu Xiang tells us that the Grandee's wife was having an affair and, in fear that her husband would discover this, she attempted to poison him.⁵³⁸ The Loyal Concubine was to serve the wine and did not want to disobey her mistress but also did not want to cause the Grandee's death. Caught in this moral quandary, she determined to spill the wine. Having spilt the wine, she was beaten by the Grandee and his wife. The wife was planning to beat the Loyal Concubine to death. The Grandee's young brother conveniently knew of this incident and the backstory and promptly informed the Grandee. The Grandee proceeds to beat his wife to death, clearly highlighting the extremes of marital control.

The Grandee frees the Loyal Concubine and seeks to marry her. The Loyal Concubine tells him that it would be inappropriate for her to marry the Grandee and take the place of her mistress. The Grandee persists and only when he learns the Loyal Concubine plans to kill herself does he relent and arrange for her a marriage to another. Many men vied for her hand in marriage. The Loyal Concubine achieves three remarkable feats in this parable:

1. She avoids killing her master through spilling the wine;
2. She does not betray the confidence of her mistress, staying quiet throughout her punishment; and
3. She maintains social class distinctions by refusing to marry the Grandee.

As the summary states, the Concubine:

Was kind and good and understood her place.⁵³⁹

慈惠有序

The importance of place within the social hierarchy and acting in accordance with that place, in this instance as an assistant to a male superior, is an ever-present underlying theme of the *Lienüzhuan*.

1.15 *Principled Woman of the Capital*

The Principled Woman's husband had any enemies, some of whom abducted her father to pressure her to kill her husband.⁵⁴⁰ The Principled Woman did not know what to do. It would

⁵³⁸ LNZ 5.10.

⁵³⁹ LNZ 5.10; trans. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 101.

⁵⁴⁰ LNZ 1.15.

be unfilial to cause her father's death and yet unrighteous to cause her husband's death. She therefore disguised herself and took the place of her husband and was killed in his stead. Her self-sacrifice resolved the situation. In consideration of her righteousness, her husband's enemies did not kill him or her father.

Women bear multiple responsibilities and, when those responsibilities conflict, they often have no choice in Liu Xiang's text but to resolve the situation by acting against themselves. This personal action could be contrasted with a divergent narrative in which the Principled Woman kills the enemies of her husband, thereby protecting both her father and her husband. This would be thoroughly incongruent with the Confucian ethos. As such, rather than pursue such an independent and capable path of action, Liu Xiang has his female characters use actions which only directly affect themselves. This is in keeping with the quotation extracted at the end of the tale from the *Analects*:

The Master said, "The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete."⁵⁴¹

子曰：「志士仁人，無求生以害仁，有殺身以成仁。」

The ethos of looking first at what you can do to yourself before you think of touching others is often inflicted with the keenest results on women. Yet, as was seen in 2.3, Jiang killed a servant (a violent and independent action) in assisting her husband. Liu Xiang applies different rules to female agency in different situations to suit his narrative, which is not always primarily concerned with women. In Ji's story, the primary concern is that the rightful heir rule the Jin state.

6.4 *The Woman of the Injured Locust Tree of Qi* (卷六之四齊傷槐女)

The Duke Jing of Qi (齊景公 [齐景公]) was fond of a particular locust tree.⁵⁴² A man who was drunk injured the tree and was imprisoned for the crime pending sentencing. The man's daughter pled his case to the Minister Yanzi (晏子). She said a sacrifice was required to obtain rain and when a duke sacrificed himself the heavens poured. She also outlined what

⁵⁴¹ *Analects* 15.9, trans. James Legge, *The Analects of Confucius*, University of Adelaide <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748a/complete.html#book15>). Slingerland's translation: 'The Master said, 'No scholar-official of noble intention or Good person would ever pursue life at the expense of Goodness, and in fact some may be called upon to give up their lives in order to fulfil Goodness'. Slingerland, *Confucius, Analects*, p. 177.

⁵⁴² *LNZ* 6.4; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 159. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 114.

constituted a good and what a bad ruler. The daughter then addressed the king's focus on trees instead of people. Minister Yanzi passed on what she said to Duke Jing. The duke immediately repealed the law protecting the tree and released the man who had been imprisoned for harming it. Through oral persuasion, the woman helped the state through the bringing of rain and freed her father. This is one of the tales in which rhetorical skill and its importance are highlighted by Liu Xiang. It is worth noting that the duke initially misunderstands the daughter's attendance at court as a sexual advance.⁵⁴³ This highlights the difficult territory women entering public spaces and engaging in interactions with men could face.

6.5 *The Discriminating Woman of the Chu Countryside* (卷六之五楚野辯女)

A grandee travelling on behalf of a duke was carrying some betrothal gifts when he came across a woman blocking the road and hit her cart, damaging his own in the process. The grandee told the woman off and wanted to beat her. She spoke out against the grandee blaming her. The messenger was ashamed of himself and released her. The grandee did ask the woman whether she would accompany him to Zheng (鄭 [郑]), to which she responded that she had a husband. Again, as in *Lienüzhuan* 6.4, rhetorical skill can be a useful tool for women in their encounters with men.⁵⁴⁴ In this tale there is an additional outcome; rhetorical skill can be an attractive quality used to capture a husband, even at the road side. Learning and understanding of the proper societal rules are valuable traits for women, accentuated by Liu Xiang more than physical beauty.

Liu Xiang imbues his female characters with a variety of skills, mainly knowledge and intelligence with which they assist their male superiors to the benefit of both the women and man concerned. What is surprising is the independent agency these women display. Mengzi moves houses several times, women approach husbands, act above their allotted situation in life—and Liu Xiang praises their actions. Such bold applause makes clear the very great divide between the world of the *Analects* and the time of Liu Xiang. For Liu Xiang, women are the assistants of men but in this role their actions have significant moral value. Such an ethos was non-existent for Confucius, which demonstrates how far the neo-Confucianism of Liu Xiang had strayed.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ This highlighted by Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 55.

⁵⁴⁴ LN2 6.5; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 161. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 116.

⁵⁴⁵ This neo-Confucian thought is part of the reformist school which Loewe identified as taking place from 49 CE onwards. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 11.

II. Women as self-interested

Unsurprisingly the self-interested women of Liu Xiang's text are all located in one chapter, Chapter 7. This chapter contains women who are horrid, selfish (displaying a '*contemptuous unconcern*') and mendacious ('*regarding truth as falsehood*'). In addition, they are '*dissolute, jealous, dazzling, and bewitching*'. Thus, Mo Xi (妹喜) in the Xia Dynasty caused the downfall of the entire dynasty.⁵⁴⁶ Liu Xiang tells us Mo Xi was beautiful but without virtue and acted in the manner of a man wearing a sword and cap.⁵⁴⁷ The king lost all sense of rightness, gave himself up to women and took advice from Mo Xi. Liu Xiang then tells his readers that the king lost a battle as his soldiers would not fight. Thus, ended the Xia Dynasty.⁵⁴⁸ While, as Mou highlights, this chapter focuses on the actions of the king more than on Mo Xi, the implication is that all the King's actions are attributable to Mo Xi.⁵⁴⁹

Liu Xiang also uses an historical example from the Zhou period to commence his diatribe. He states that Bao Si (褒姒), consort of King Yu of Zhou, destroyed the Zhou Dynasty.⁵⁵⁰ Bao Si had an inauspicious birth, being the product of a virgin concubine and a snake. Most damning, she achieved removal of the current heir apparent in favour of her own son and through a 'cry wolf' incident ensured that when help was needed by Zhou, none arrived. In each example, the women lead to misfortune and defeat. The historical examples of the fall of great kings is a proscriptive edict from Liu Xiang; he means that they *should* suffer misfortune and defeat. It is relevant that an account of Bao Si also exists in Sima Qian's accounts of the Xiongnu.⁵⁵¹ Sima Qian merely remarks that 'egged on' by his beloved concubine Bao Si, King Yu of the Zhou quarrelled with Marquis Shen. Bao Si does not warrant more than one mention in the *Shiji*, which likely reveals the limited nature of her true involvement. However, Liu Xiang elevates the importance of the actions of women to further his didactic purpose. Thus, 'wicked consorts bring not only disaster to the emperor but also downfall to the state'.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁶ LNZ 7.1.

⁵⁴⁷ LNZ 7.1; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 186. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 135.

⁵⁴⁸ It is interesting to ponder whether Liu Xiang, coming shortly after Wang Mang's Xia Dynasty (named in reference to the original), drew any comparisons between the failure of both Xin Dynasties.

⁵⁴⁹ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 61.

⁵⁵⁰ LNZ 7.3; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 189–92. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 138. Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 159.

⁵⁵¹ SJ 110; Watson II, p. 130.

⁵⁵² Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 59. Mou states that the focus in several chapters on the behaviour of kings affected by depraved women demonstrates the text is a warning to men as much as women (p. 62).

7.5 Wen Jiang, Wife of Duke Huan of Lu (卷七之五 魯桓文姜)

Wen Jiang was the wife of Duke Huan of Lu and sister of Duke Xiang of Qi (齊襄公).⁵⁵³ Liu Xiang asserts that Wen Jiang had an incestuous relationship with Duke Xiang. Duke Huan found out about this and was infuriated; he tried to stop Wen Jiang. Wen Jiang told her brothers and Duke Xiang feasted with Duke Huan and offered him wine to make him drunk. Duke Xiang sent Prince Pengsheng, his half-brother, to pick up Duke Huan. The prince fractured Duke Huan's ribcage and he died. The men of Lu sought redress and killed Prince Pengsheng. Liu Xiang extracts his account from the *Shijing* saying;

disorder does not come down from Heaven. It is produced by women.

亂匪降自天，生自婦人。⁵⁵⁴

It is worth noting that in this story, an advisor to Duke Huan advises against travelling to Qi with Wen Jiang. As Kinney notes, there were restrictions against women leaving the borders of their husband's states without good cause, as a measure to prevent liaisons.⁵⁵⁵ Women are seen here as the cause of sexual relationships, which breed tensions between men. Wen Jiang, rather than Duke Xiang, is the focal source of tension here, although presumably a man should not sleep with his brother-in-law's wife, nor a brother with his sister. Liu Xiang focuses here on Wen Jiang's sexual appetite as the cause of her husband's death, suggesting female sexual agency has destructive qualities.⁵⁵⁶

7.6 Ai Jiang, Wife of Duke Zhuang of Lu (卷七之六 魯莊哀姜)

It appears the state of Lu was particularly promiscuous. Ai Jiang was the wife of Duke Zhuang of Lu and had sexual relations with the duke prior to their marriage.⁵⁵⁷ Kinney states that there is a suggestion the duke himself should not have attended with betrothal gifts, rather, an officer should have attended on his behalf.⁵⁵⁸ Ai Jiang also had affairs with the duke's two young brothers and wanted to enthrone one of them, Prince Qingfu (慶父), after

⁵⁵³ LNZ 7.5.

⁵⁵⁴ LNZ 7.5; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 194. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 140.

⁵⁵⁵ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 246, n. 51.

⁵⁵⁶ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 62.

⁵⁵⁷ LNZ 7.6; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 194. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 141.

⁵⁵⁸ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 264, n. 56.

Duke Zhuang died. Again, female sexual behaviour warrants censure and, if unrestricted, causes chaos.

Ziban (子般), a son of the Duke Zhuang by another woman, succeeded his father as duke. After Ai Jiang and Prince Qingfu killed him, Ai Jiang's sister's son by the Duke Zhuang, Duke Min, was enthroned. Clearly, just as Ai Jiang slept with her husband's brother so did her husband sleep with her sister. That Liu Xiang examines one and not the other makes clear the double standard applying to imperial women. Duke Min was later killed by Ai Jiang and Prince Qingfu. When the state of Lu fell into ruin as a result, Duke Huan of Qi marched in and took over. When Duke Huan discovered Ai Jiang's conduct he organised for her to be poisoned.

It appears that the real crime in this story, in Liu Xiang's view, was the role of Ai Jiang and possibly Shu Jiang in installing Duke Min over Duke Zhuang's choice, Ziban. Consorts frequently sought to control the succession of a new duke, king or emperor and Liu Xiang's warning against this is clear. Meddle with the succession to consolidate your own power base and you will suffer.

7.7 *Li Ji, Consort of Duke Xian of Jin* (卷七之七 晉獻驪姬)

Duke Xian killed Li Ji's father and yet she became his favourite concubine, and later his wife/consort.⁵⁵⁹ As consort, she plotted with her sister to establish her son as the heir apparent/crown prince. This necessarily involved removing the existing heir apparent. Li Ji drove a wedge between Duke Xian and the crown prince by suggesting the crown prince was plotting to kill his father. This created a suspicion in Duke Xian's mind. Li Ji arranged for meats for the duke from the crown prince to be poisoned, then accused the crown prince of attempting to kill his father and 'uncovered' the poison. The crown prince, who of course was virtuous, did not want to cause the death of Li Ji and trouble his father, so he committed suicide.

The Duke Xian made Li Ji's son crown prince and when Duke Xian died he ascended the throne. The new duke was then deposed, and Li Ji's second son became duke. The second son was then killed. Li Ji was later whipped and killed. Liu Xiang states Jin was in disorder for five generations, so deep do the selfish actions of women cut. A contrary view, not

⁵⁵⁹ *LNZ* 7.7; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 196. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 142.

explored by Liu Xiang directly, might emphasise the wisdom of marrying a woman whose father you have killed on the basis that that, too, might have its consequences.

7.14 *Queen Li, Wife of King Kao of Chu* (卷七之十四楚考李后)

Li Yuan (李園), brother of Queen Li, gave her to Lord Chunshen of Chu (春申君).⁵⁶⁰ Queen Li advised her husband that the king favoured her and that, as the king had no children, his brothers would inherit. Queen Li planned to cultivate favour with the brothers become concubine to the king. Queen Li said to her husband Lord Chunshen, ‘others do not know I am pregnant and we can pass the child off as the king’s, and we will have the power of the kingdom’. Lord Chunshen approved of the plan and Li entered the king’s harem. The child was male and was named Dao. Li Yuan wished to kill Lord Chunshen to silence him and did so once King Kao died. Dao became King You and ascended the throne. When King You died, another son of King Kao was enthroned as King Ai. It was suspected that King You and King Ai were not the sons of King Kao. The Queen Dowager Li and King Ai of Chu (楚哀王) were killed by supporters of King Kao’s younger brother. Liu Xiang adds that within five years the state of Chu was destroyed by Qin.

Liu Xiang includes substantial familial drama in this story. Although Liu Xiang focused on the destructive nature of Queen Li and Li Yuan’s influence as consort families, it is hard to overlook the fact that it was a younger brother of King Kao who arguably contributed further and/or created the turmoil. What Liu Xiang presents as a tale of female maleficence may be explained as a simple family power struggle, and the assertion that King You and King Ai were not biological sons of King Kao viewed as a slur to bolster the legitimacy of King Kao’s younger brothers. In the instance of Queen Li, Liu Xiang’s effort to construe the tales through the lens of female behaviour is evident. To draw a correlation between the family drama outlined by Liu Xiang and the fall of Chu is a difficult task. It is, perhaps, for this reason that it is not only the women in each tale but also the men who are to blame.⁵⁶¹

7.15 *The Songstress Queen of King Dao of Zhao* (卷七之十五趙悼倡后)

The Songstress Queen was a widow when she was noticed by King Dao, who was struck by her beauty and married her.⁵⁶² His ministers remonstrated with him that the state and its stability

⁵⁶⁰ LNZ 7.14; trans. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 211. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 154.

⁵⁶¹ Mou, *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions*, p. 64.

⁵⁶² LNZ 7.15; trans. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 212. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 155.

would be turned upside down on the basis the Songstress Queen had caused disorder for her clan. King Dao thought he could handle that and married her nonetheless. Prior to the arrival of the Songstress Queen, the king had appointed an heir apparent. The Songstress Queen became a favourite of the King and slandered the existing queen to promote her son, Qian.

The Songstress Queen arranged for someone to arrange to offend the heir apparent and cause him to commit a crime. This succeeded, and the king cast aside the heir apparent and replaced him with Qian, who was later enthroned. The Songstress Queen had an illicit relationship with the Lord of Chunping, accepted bribes from the state of Qin and manoeuvred to enable the troops of Qin to enter and attack Zhao. This was the end of the state of Zhao.

Liu Xiang blames women in this story and in 7.14 for the destruction of two kingdoms. Liu Xiang would have us believe consort women, rather than the great Qin army, were responsible.⁵⁶³ It is clear in the example of the Songstress Queen that Liu Xiang considered her rank as a singer was inappropriately low for her to be a suitable consort for King Dao.⁵⁶⁴ This has ramifications for imperial consorts closer to Liu Xiang's own period than the end of the warring states.

III. Women as paragons of virtue, morality and intelligence

Liu Xiang does provide many examples of women endowed with virtue, morality and intelligence such that they surpass their male counterparts. Often, in behaving in a way consistent with these values, women find themselves in conflict with their peers and the wishes of those around them, including male social superiors.

3.14 *The Old Woman of Quwo of Wei* (卷三之十四魏曲沃負)

The Old Woman of Quwo of Wei puts herself forward as an advisor in King Ai of Wei's (哀王) search for a wife for his son, the crown prince.⁵⁶⁵ The king had found a wife for his son, but he liked her so much, he planned to take her for himself instead. The old woman, who was the mother of a grandee, addressed the king regarding the stages of life for a woman: at 15 she receives the hairpin (is betrothed), at 20 she marries. The old woman also instructed the king

⁵⁶³ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 276, n. 190 notes that the *Shiji* makes no mention of the Songstress Queen receiving bribes from Qin, suggesting it may be a later convenient insertion by Liu Xiang.

⁵⁶⁴ This is consistent with the status of singers being considered quite low. See Dull (Trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 55.

⁵⁶⁵ LNZ 3.14; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 97. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 62.

on the correct procedure for marriage. She outlined that marriage without the preliminary formalities made a woman a concubine rather than a wife. She criticised the king for placing his son's intended wife into his harem. The old woman told the king that if he kept this woman in the harem he would destroy the moral standing of a pure woman and throw into disarray the proper separation of women and men. Here, the propriety of a consort is a vital element of whether a state will succeed.⁵⁶⁶ Again, Liu Xiang makes women responsible for the fate of the state, perhaps demonstrating women were keen political players in his view.

In addition, the old woman, in a didactic message from Liu Xiang, states that when proper order is maintained among the ruler's consorts, the state flourishes; if proper order is not maintained, chaos results. Here the implicit message of the entire *Lienüzhuan* is made explicit: proper consort and ruler relationships are vital to the state's success. The King of Wei agreed, returned the woman to his son to be his wife and rewarded the old woman. The old woman places the relationships of father and child, husband and wife, and ruler and subject as the three most important relationships. All three must be managed and in order. Interestingly, Liu Xiang gives wife and husband pre-eminence, yet all consort relationships with the ruler must be in order. Primarily, the relationship with a wife must be in order, but the relationships with other consorts (concubines), while of lesser importance, must equally must be proper. This certainly fits with Liu Xiang's anti-consort power rhetoric. In one way, one wife is more easily dealt with than a multitude of consorts. However, all consorts must also be in harmony, through submitting to the service of their lord. Arguably a 'sensible' emperor would more likely marry a woman from an elite family and keep women from a lower class in the harem rather than marrying the latter and making the former concubines.

Similarly, in *Lienüzhuan* 2.1, Queen Jiang offers herself for punishment in the place of her husband because of his indolence. This is an action taken, or characterised by Liu Xiang as undertaken, to reform King Xuan of Zhou. Thus, it is much like the actions of the Old Woman of Quwo in Wei.

4.2 Bo Ji, Consort of Duke Gong of Song (卷四之二宋恭伯姬)

Bo Ji was the daughter of the Duke of Lu, who organised that she would marry the Duke of Song (宋公).⁵⁶⁷ The Duke of Song, however, did not come to greet his bride, and Bo Ji raised

⁵⁶⁶ Raphals sees this story as encapsulating the central argument of the *Lienüzhuan*. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 40.

⁵⁶⁷ LNZ 4.2; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 103. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 68.

this as an impediment to the marriage ceremony. In this instance, Liu Xiang presents women as upholding of the ritualistic (and, by modern standards, often pedantic) standards of behaviour. Bo Ji's parents nonetheless insisted that the marriage proceed and ordered that she go to the Duke of Song. This makes it clear that Bo Ji, for all her virtue, was not powerful enough to influence whether her own marriage went ahead.

4.6 *Meng Ji, Wife of Duke Xiao of Qi* (卷四之六齊孝孟姬)

Meng Ji was the eldest daughter of the Hua family.⁵⁶⁸ She had passed the usual age for marriage. Suitors came forward, but they did not follow the proper rites. Often, a man would ask to marry her but would omit the proper ceremonies, so she would not go to his house. Meng Ji remained sequestered to avoid suspicion. Duke Xiao heard of this story and studied the proprieties, then went in person to the Hua family home. After three months, Meng Ji and the duke became husband and wife.

This story demonstrates that a woman could make a stand, so to speak, if she was doing so within the rules. Unlike Bo Ji above, Meng Ji is successful and, as a result, she is delivered an improved marriage partner (having regard to the prospects, wealth and importance of the duke as a husband). It is worth noting that Meng Ji secludes herself to protect her purity. The concept that women can be contaminated through too much contact (or any contact) with men who are not from their families is a constraining one. Without access to the outside world, women like Meng Ji must rely on gossip for their fame to circulate and thus attract a suitable husband.

It may be that the difference between Bo Ji and Meng Ji is that Bo Ji's marriage had political elements, which Meng Ji's did not. After all, Bo Ji's father has arranged an alliance with the Duke of Song. Thus, Liu Xiang acknowledged that political importance likely outweighs concerns regarding propriety. Meng Ji's family name is not mentioned and, thus, her marriage was not influenced by political concerns. Liu Xiang clearly emphasises the importance of propriety in forming a successful marriage.

4.14 *The Exalted Conduct of the Widow of Liang* (卷四之十四梁寡高行)

The Widow of Liang is perhaps the most extreme and unpleasant example of the self-sacrifice model.⁵⁶⁹ She became a widow early in life and did not remarry, although her

⁵⁶⁸ LNZ 4.6, trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 109. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 72.

⁵⁶⁹ LNZ 4.14; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 122. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 83.

beauty and virtue meant many men sought to marry her. It is worth noting that although Liu Xiang and the women he writes about did not see a second husband as appropriate, their male characters and counterparts see no such issue. This suggests Liu Xiang's views are somewhat revolutionary. The King of Liang (梁王) sought to marry the widow and she refused. In an extreme measure, she took up a knife and cut off her nose, thereby disfiguring herself so she would be undesirable. Liu Xiang notes the widow did not kill herself out of concern for her children, who were fatherless.

The Widow of Liang displays virtue by destroying her physical beauty, as it is because of her physical beauty that the King of Liang seeks her. She is punished and damages herself irrevocably to avoid the desires of others.⁵⁷⁰ The solution lies with women, but it is not enough that she merely refuses; she removes the possibility anyone will ask. Indeed, Kinney states that it is possible she is pre-empting the king's punishment for refusing his proposal.⁵⁷¹ Again, a woman's only power is over her own body, and even then, that power is limited in its expression; it is only in sacrifice that agency is found for women in the *Lienüzhuan*. Mou describes this as women being their own agents.⁵⁷² This approach is short-sighted; these female characters serve Liu Xiang's purpose, and they are ultimately his agents or the agents of social (Confucian) convention.⁵⁷³ Further, allowing agency only in the strictest physical sense renders women's options significantly limited. It would be unthinkable for the Widow of Liang to act against the King of Liang who would seek her bed against her wishes.

It has been argued that Liu Xiang created this tale complete, and it is not based on any historical story that existed beforehand.⁵⁷⁴ This would explain the later increase in the number of such stories, on the basis that Liu Xiang's was a pioneering text. The contents of the tale and the violent self-mutilation contained therein are radical and shocking.⁵⁷⁵ They also marked a change in Chinese thinking regarding preservation of chastity through dramatic self-sacrifice.⁵⁷⁶ Female virtue was important not for its own sake and how it

⁵⁷⁰ Mou outlines that the early self-mutilation stories of Liu Xiang gained significant traction in the Tang Dynasty. *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 73, n. 76.

⁵⁷¹ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 240, n. 106.

⁵⁷² Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 50.

⁵⁷³ Mann, 'Presidential Address', p. 843. Mann refers to images informed by the *Lienüzhuan* in the Wu Liang Shrine, including an image of Liang cutting off her nose. Mann states this imagery on the shrine admonishes the surviving spouse and 'shows the ideal widow in her dead husband's eyes'.

⁵⁷⁴ Hinsch, 'Lienüzhuan Narratives', p. 51, n. 26.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁷⁶ Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 76.

reflected on women but, rather, due to the way it influenced male honour. Widow Liang is preserving her husband's honour even after his death through her actions.⁵⁷⁷ It is a woman's impact on male honour that determines her value.⁵⁷⁸

1.12 *Mother-Teacher of Lu* (卷一之十二魯之母師)

In the story of the Mother-Teacher of Lu, readers are told that women should not leave their husband's house generally.⁵⁷⁹ Yet, to undertake the rites, the Mother-Teacher of Lu does just this. She then returns home before the time she had said she would, which creates a problem—she does not want to catch her nine sons 'unawares while they were indulging their desires'. This translation from O'Hara no doubt sounds more salacious than Liu Xiang intended; however, again we find female sacrifice (i.e., standing bored stiff outside the village gate waiting till the allotted time) to benefit men. In this instance, the obvious question is: the Mother-Teacher is virtuous in her respect for her son's privacy and the wish to avoid an awkward family situation, but what of the virtue of her nine sons who are indulging their desires?

Kinney, however, posits a different translation which suggests that the Mother-teacher returned early but, not wishing to interrupt and spoil the fun of her sons and their wives and children, she waits for the time she stated she would return. This, rather than a salacious indulgence of desires, suits the tenor of Liu Xiang's text, as it promotes 'family values'. The Mother-Teacher's behaviour comes to the attention of the grandee who passes the story to the Duke of Mu. The duke in turn orders her to attend upon his wife and concubines and be their teacher.

5.6 *The Righteous Aunt of Lu* (卷五之六魯義姑姊)

The Aunt of Lu was fleeing the approaching soldiers of Qi (齊) and was carrying her own son and her brother's eldest son.⁵⁸⁰ In order to escape the soldiers, the Aunt of Lu left her own son behind and continued with her brother's son. The soldiers of Qi saw that she had left the child and asked if the Aunt of Lu was his mother. The child replied yes and, curious, the soldiers caught up to the Aunt of Lu. It is worth noting this throws into doubt the efficacy

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁷⁹ LNZ 1.12; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 43. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 20.

⁵⁸⁰ LNZ 5.6; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, 136. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 95.

of casting off her own child. The soldiers asked why she had left her own son. The Aunt of Lu responded that her love for her son was a private duty while her responsibility to save her brother's child duty was a public duty; the public duty came first. The soldiers ceased their attack on Lu because of her impressive example, on the basis that, if she showed such virtue, the ministers and grandees of court must be even more virtuous.

The entire example is likely allegorical and likely only loosely founded on any historical event. Conquest is generally motivated by economic or political aspirations, which do not bow to the petty concerns of aunts saving their nephews. Liu Xiang's account here, as elsewhere, is a crafted fictional exercise in instruction. It is also notable that the Aunt of Lu is referred to not by name but in terms of her familial role to her male relatives, as with so many of Liu Xiang's characters. As the verse summary states:

One woman practiced righteousness
And the army of Qi was halted.
[一婦為義，
齊兵遂止]

In this way, Liu Xiang elevates the importance of female virtue; his story reveals that a common woman can save the state through her actions. It also, again, follows the path of female characters preferring the interests of others over their own. Righteousness in female life meant a life of self-subjugation and sacrifice.⁵⁸¹ Note, also, that there are clear social distinctions being made; Liu Xiang often inverts the normal hierarchy by giving 'common' or non-elite women great virtue to demonstrate some inadequacy in men.

5.8 *The Righteous Stepmother of Qi* (卷五之八齊義繼母)

Similarly, to the Aunt of Lu in 5.7, the Stepmother of Qi sacrificed her own son for the son of her husband's first wife.⁵⁸² The two sons had been found next to a dead man, meaning one or both had committed murder. Both stated they had killed the man. The magistrate did not know who to charge and so asked the mother to tell who was lying. Rather than doing what she was told, the Stepmother of Qi said to kill her own son to save the son of her

⁵⁸¹ Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, pp. 51–2. Mou sees these examples as demonstrating female agency. However, this thesis posits rather that Liu Xiang's female creations are merely agents of his own theoretical arguments.

⁵⁸² LN2 5.8; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 139. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 97.

husband's previous wife. The boy's father had made her promise on his death bed to care for the first son.

Like the Aunt of Lu, the Stepmother of Qi determined to follow that public duty over her private duty. As a result of this display of virtue, the king did not punish either son. She thereby holds a dual role as the assistant of her son and stepson in addition to being a paragon of virtue. This story reveals something interesting about the Han Dynasty sense of moral culpability and individual responsibility. A demonstration of righteousness or virtue by a mother can save her son and stepson from punishment for a murder, but why is this acceptable; is it

- because if the Aunt of Lu is so righteous her sons cannot have committed murder;
- that because of her righteousness, her sons should not be punished (i.e. familial righteousness outweighs individual responsibility for criminal conduct); or
- that readers are to assume the sons did not commit murder and this explains their 'I am Spartacus' routine?

The lack of resolution concerning the sons' guilt for the murder is a sure sign that the issue of culpability for murder is simply not in Liu Xiang's focus. It is, of course, entirely possible that both sons killed the man together. Through detachment via intellectual conceptualising, Liu Xiang lifts what is a seedy criminal tale out of the gutter and creates a tale of female virtue. This further demonstrates that Liu Xiang's text contains examples that Han Dynasty readers likely viewed as emblematic rather than literal. Thus, while the concept of woman is coercive and normative, a more diluted version might be expected in real life. The Han Dynasty way of addressing murder would be utterly compromised (and meaningless) if the Aunt of Lu's example could be implemented to the letter to exculpate murderers.

6.11 *The Woman from Qi who had a Goitre* (卷六之十一齊宿瘤女)

King Min of Qi (齊湣王) was on a pleasure excursion and noticed that while all the common people paid him attention, a woman with a goitre did not, but instead continued picking mulberries.⁵⁸³ He asked her why she did not look; she answered her parents had told her to pick mulberries but had not told her to look at the king. The king was impressed by her

⁵⁸³ LNZ 6.11; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 174. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 126.

obedience to her parent's instructions. He observed that it was a pity she had a goitre; she responded that there was no harm in having a goitre.

The king wanted her to accompany him, presumably as a concubine or a wife. The woman refused, demanding the proper procedures be followed. She said that if she disobeyed her parent's teachings and accompanied the king, she would become 'a fallen woman' or *bennü* (奔女). The king realised the error of his ways and arranged for the appropriate betrothal gifts to be sent to her parents. Her parents suggested the monetary portion of the gift be used to purchase her some lovely clothing. The woman countered that if this was done, the king would not recognise her. When she arrived at court all the ladies had dressed in their best finery to greet her. They found her to be so plain it made them laugh. The king rebuked them for laughing and the woman said virtue, not fine dresses or jewellery, was an adornment. This made the ladies ashamed. Her influence on the King was a good one and after her death the kingdom failed.

There are several instructive aspects to this short vignette, which reveal features of the Han Dynasty and pre-Han times. Firstly, physical beauty was clearly of significance to early Chinese in their evaluation of women. Secondly, the proper procedures of marriage, via the giving of betrothal gifts, brought a financial benefit to the female partner's family and demonstrates the transactional aspects of marriage. Thirdly, beauty, while attractive, can be just that and nothing else; it offers only superficial benefits while virtue, it is argued, provides far more useful benefits that have longevity (such as a wife's good influence on her husband).

Perhaps most importantly, this tale, combined with all of Liu Xiang's stories that address marriage (and many of them do), reveals there was a great tension (in elite circles at least) concerning the place of women depending on the procedures which led up to their entering a man's household. Many of Liu Xiang's characters are virtuous and seek to avoid being acquired other than by the proper way. The way a woman entered a man's house determined the status and protections provided to her. It also determined any rewards provided to her family and their relationship with the man. The woman in this story demands the proper procedures are followed. These are procedures for betrothal and yet, when she attends court, it is then that the king determines to make her queen. There is a lesson here for women, but also, and more importantly, for men—a virtuous woman will not submit to improper actions. This is a very dangerous concept that belies the power imbalances present in Han Dynasty women's reality and encourages blame for impropriety to be placed at the feet of women.

Interestingly, Liu Xiang attributes the King Ming of Qi's success in expanding his empire to the influence of this woman. Further, once she dies the state of Yan attacks and destroys Qi, the king flees and is murdered. A woman, Liu Xiang states, can literally be a talisman of protection for a ruler. The message could not be clearer—a worthy consort can result in an emperor who achieves the heights of success; without a worthy consort, this success will all be destroyed.

2.9 *The Wife of Da Zi of Tao* (卷二之九陶荅子妻)

The Wife of Da Zi of Tao is one of the rare chapters in the *Lienüzhuan* in which a woman acts to preserve her own person and strongly opposes her husband's actions.⁵⁸⁴ Her husband was not skilled in virtue, but he amassed great wealth, nonetheless. His wife wept because of this and was admonished by her husband to no avail. When she wished to leave her husband and take her son, her mother-in-law threw her out. Leaving one's husband was unusual and a direct contrast to the story of the Wife of Bao of Song, (卷二之七宋鮑女宗) in 2.7, who insists she must stay with her husband.⁵⁸⁵ Thus making opposing a husband is relatively unimportant in comparison with the error of achieving only profit at the sacrifice of virtue. Might it be that Liu Xiang reveals a prejudice here against those who amass wealth without regard to the fundamentals of virtue upon which his Han Dynasty courtly society was dependent?

Similarly, in 3.3 the daughter of Duke Yi of Wei (衛懿公) argues (albeit unsuccessfully) for an alliance with Qi instead of Xu and submitted that she should be married to the King of Qi (齊王). Her father does not agree, to his peril. In both instances women strongly oppose their male counterparts. Subsequently the passage of time establishes the wisdom of these women's recommendations.

6.15 *Daughter of the Director of the Great Granary of Qi* (卷六之十五齊太倉女)

Ti Ying aided her father when he was condemned to corporal punishment.⁵⁸⁶ Ti Ying had no brothers so there was no son to assist her father when he was condemned. Her father complained bitterly at the uselessness of daughters at times like this. She therefore took the unusual step of attending the court and asking to become a palace servant to redeem her

⁵⁸⁴ LNZ 2.9; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 63. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 36.

⁵⁸⁵ This is also highlighted by Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 37.

⁵⁸⁶ LNZ 6.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 183. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 133.

father's fault. Ti Ying submitted an eloquent and persuasive petition to the Emperor Wen. Her petition highlighted that, once condemned, her father might wish to correct his faults but would left unable to do so because of death or mutilation. Liu Xiang states she argued as follows:

I grieve that the dead will have no chance to live again and that those who undergo a mutilating punishment cannot be made whole again. And even if they desire to reform and begin again, they would have no way to do so. Please allow me to enter service as a government slave to pay for my father's crime and to allow him to make a new beginning.⁵⁸⁷
 妾傷夫死者不可復生，刑者不可復屬，雖[復]欲改過自新，其道無由也。妾願入身為官婢，以贖父罪，使得自新。

Ti Ying was successful; her father was spared, and an edict issued abolishing mutilating punishments. The Emperor Wen also accepted responsibility for his citizens' wrongdoing, stating that, as father of the nation, it was his deficient virtue and failure to teach the people that resulted in crime. Liu Xiang identifies female agency here in the familial context as having far-reaching societal benefits.

IV. Women in their rightful place

This group of women make the ultimate self-sacrifice in Liu Xiang's text: suicide. In other instances, death is the result of selfless actions women undertake. As Kinney points out,

[w]hen we read accounts of ethically motivated suicide, it is important to keep in mind that most people in early China probably viewed the extreme behaviour lauded in some of these stories as acts which were to be admired but not followed.⁵⁸⁸

Kinney bases this on the lack of contemporary examples of such extreme behaviour from the Han Dynasty. The focus of the reader should, thus, be the behaviour that is avoided rather than the means of avoiding it, the latter possibly being a flourish added by Liu Xiang. Empress Wang was said to have burned to death to atone for the crimes of her father, Wang Mang.⁵⁸⁹ This incident is far too convenient a win for the subsequent anti-Wang Mang cause to allow it to be merely accepted as credible. As Bielenstein has argued, Ban Gu employs

⁵⁸⁷ LNZ 6.15, trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 184.

⁵⁸⁸ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. XLII.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XLIII.

stereotypes that delegitimise Wang Mang.⁵⁹⁰ The death of Empress Wang was reconstructed as payment for her father's crimes. Such a construction may have been influenced by Liu Xiang's text.

1.9 *Jing Jiang of the Ji Lineage of Lu* (卷一之十魯季敬姜)

The story of Jing Jiang of Lu is a significant story within the *Lienüzhuan*, if only because of its size; Liu Xiang devotes more characters to this than any other story within the *Lienüzhuan*.⁵⁹¹ Jing Jiang of Lu was the mother of Wenbo and wife of a Lu grandee, Lu Gongfu Mubo. Mubo died and Jing Jiang retained her chastity and did not remarry. Jing Jiang was very active in her spinning and weaving, and schooled her son, Wenbo, in correct behaviour. At first, she did this through using an historical example, King Wu, and later through analogies between the process of weaving and ruling a country. She told her son that active people who are hardworking have good hearts and that those who are idle become bad as a result. Liu Xiang here is surely taking a shot at emperors and consorts who indulge themselves hiding away in the imperial court rather than being productive.

It is significant that Jing Jiang's tale quotes the *Shijing*, stating:

“The women have no public duties, they abide by their silkworm work and weaving.”

This means that women make weaving and spinning their official occupation, and to refrain from it contravenes ritual.⁵⁹²

婦無公事，休其蠶織。言婦人以織績為公事者也。休之非禮也。

This tells us that a woman's place was producing goods for her husband to wear and that individuals had to fulfil behaviours that were thought proper. It also makes clear that although women have personal influence with their husbands/partners, they do not have a public office to fill as men do; a woman's place is in the inner court, not the outer court.

Court life must have been quite restrictive and very public by modern or even contemporary but non-elite familial standards. Jing Jiang's own tale in the *Lienüzhuan* makes it clear, however, that women did much more than spinning and weaving. Jing uses her loom and its

⁵⁹⁰ Bielenstein, 'Wang Mang, restoration of Han Dynasty and Later Han', p. 239 and pp. 240–4. Wang Mang was not responsible for the creation of the Red Eyebrow Rebellion; rather, the changing course of the Yellow River had resulted in such extreme death and starvation that bands of peasants took up arms in search of food.

⁵⁹¹ LNZ 1.9; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 30. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 12.

⁵⁹² LNZ 1.9; trans. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 15.

various apparatus to explain statecraft to her son. Spinning and weaving were imbued with moral significance, and the analogy of statecraft with weaving works because of the component elements in each that must work together in different ways to produce one outcome. Jing's son does not question her lesson; he accepts it. Raphals views this acceptance also as a premise of her lesson—that Jing knows more about statecraft than her own son.⁵⁹³ Liu Xiang also reveals an intimate knowledge of the loom in his detailed account of Jing's lesson.

The modern concept of weaving and spinning as tasks for meek and submissive women is not completely accurate if applied to the Han. Spinning and weaving had moral value in Han China and it is, therefore, not surprising that Liu Xiang crafts an analogy between the eight offices of state and the eight parts of a loom. Jing Jiang spins and weaves for her husband and then her son, but this does not mean she has no opinions to share or instruction to give regarding righteousness. Indeed, Jing demonstrated the 'complex and subtle process of negotiation for power within the Confucian framework of patriarchy and gendered work'.⁵⁹⁴ Jing Jiang schools her son and, at one stage, bars him from the house due to an incorrect ritual involving the serving of turtle.

There were definite limits to what women were supposed to discuss, however. In the *Lienüzhuan*, Jing visits her great-nephew Ji Kangzi (季康子) who speaks to her, but she does not reply. Later, he questions her as to why she would not reply:

She replied: 'have you not heard? The Son of Heaven and his noblemen discuss affairs of the people in the out court and those of the deities, in the inner court. High-ranking officials discuss their official women outside [the home], and their family matters inside [the home]. Inside the bedroom, women rule their affairs. [This distinction between outside and inside] is consistent from top down. Outside, you were busy with your official work and inside, with Ji family business – both spaces are beyond what I can comment.'⁵⁹⁵

敬姜對曰：「子不聞耶？天子及諸侯合民事於內朝，自卿大夫以下合官職於外朝，合家事於內朝，寢門之內，婦人治其職焉。上下同之。夫外朝子將業君之官職焉，內朝子將庀季氏之政焉，皆非吾所敢言也。」

⁵⁹³ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 33.

⁵⁹⁴ Sheng, 'Women's Work Virtue and Space', p. 13.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21. LNZ 1.9.

In this conversation with her great-nephew, Jing severely curtails what she can discuss with him. Indeed, Liu Xiang appears to curb the conversational scope for all women in the Han Dynasty. This stands in seeming contradiction to the lessons Jing provided to her son. There is a tension between women being unable to comment beyond their own familial situation and providing the education contained throughout the *Lienüzhuan* to their sons. Sheng, however, incorrectly characterises the paragraph as meaning ‘women could only act and speak within the confines of her bedroom’.⁵⁹⁶ This appears to indicate that only within their bedrooms did women have autonomy. Further, Jing views official discussions and Ji family business as outside of her appropriate scope. Jing had married outside of the Ji family and moved into a new family (namely that of her husband) and her great-nephew may be referring to his nuclear family’s business rather than issues concerning the entire clan. This could explain how such discussion would be outside of an area upon which she could pass comment.

Women Weave

In the Han Dynasty, there were concerns that embroidery and luxurious cloth weaving was distracting women from the virtue of simpler familial weaving. There was even an edict from Emperor Jing on the topic.⁵⁹⁷ The imperial family also provided a template through its actions. The Emperor Jing was presented as tending the fields personally and Empress Bo tending to the mulberry trees offering grain and textiles to the ancestral temple, for the households throughout the empire.⁵⁹⁸ Liu Xiang’s other works reveal he viewed women’s weaving as the height of virtue.⁵⁹⁹

In the *Lienüzhuan*, Ji, the wife of Duke Bai of Chu (卷四之十一楚白貞姬) wove cloth following her husband’s death to make a living and refused to remarry.⁶⁰⁰ Tao Ying(陶嬰), a young widow, raised her orphaned children and supported them by spinning for a living.⁶⁰¹ Further, the Filial Wife of Chen (陳寡孝婦) was widowed young and was childless but had promised her husband she would care for his mother. As such, the widow Chen spun cloth

⁵⁹⁶ Sheng, ‘Women’s Work Virtue and Space’, p. 21.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁹⁹ Sanft, ‘Dying in Liu Xiang’s Anthologies’, p. 148. Liu Xiang anthologises the story of Bao Jiao who ploughed for himself and wore only cloth his wife wove.

⁶⁰⁰ LNZ 4.11; trans. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 118. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 79.

⁶⁰¹ LNZ 4.13; trans. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 121. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 82.

to make a living and support her mother-in-law. The widow Chen also refused to remarry and, as a result, the Emperor Wen presented her with gold and established her liberty throughout her life.⁶⁰²

In another section of the *Lienüzhuan*, Liu Xiang presents the wife of Qiu Huzi (秋胡子). In her husband's absence, she uses her skills in sericulture to produce textiles and provide food and clothes for her family. Her husband returned from his work after five years and attempted to seduce his own wife. His wife berated him before departing and drowning herself in a river.⁶⁰³

Liu Xiang promotes one partner for life for women and it appears that in the *Lienüzhuan* he provides a clear way in which women could afford to do so, namely cloth production. As Yang has noted, textiles were representative of womanly work and demonstrated industry and capability on the part of women.⁶⁰⁴ More importantly, women who undertake textile work benefit their family but also act out submission to the social hierarchy of Han Dynasty China.⁶⁰⁵

2.7 *The Wife of Bao of Song* (卷二之七宋鮑女宗)

Bao of Song held an official position in Wey (衛) and was away for three years.⁶⁰⁶ In his absence, his wife cared for her husband's mother diligently. Meanwhile, her husband was giving many presents to his secret mistress. Her sister-in-law asked her why she did not leave her unfaithful husband. The wife of Bao answered that women remain committed to their marriage for life, even after their husband dies. Purity and obedience are the highest achievements for women. She also stated that as her husband, Bao, is an army official it is fitting he has two women. This explicitly demonstrates the gender disadvantage Han Dynasty women faced. The secondary and subordinate role of women is cemented when we consider their inequality of sexual access. Women are the possessions of men and only men may have multiple partners.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰² LNZ 4.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 124. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 84.

⁶⁰³ LNZ 5.9; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 142–4. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 99.

⁶⁰⁴ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 194. Yang draws on the comparison between the importance of weaving or textiles work to women in ancient Greece and ancient China.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶⁰⁶ LNZ 2.7; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 60. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 33.

⁶⁰⁷ Chan, 'Gender and Relationship Roles', p. 128.

The wife of Bao reminds us that there are seven reasons for a man to divorce his wife but no reason for which a woman may divorce her husband, when she states:

Moreover, the woman has seven reasons for being divorced but there is not one righteous reason for her to leave him.⁶⁰⁸

且婦人有七見去。[夫]無一去義。

This is a clear enunciation of female subordination; the rights that men enjoy are not open for women because women are less than men and do not deserve or require the same. This passage also reveals the undercurrent of Liu Xiang's text, in which rewards accrue to women who accept their different and less preferential treatment as correct. The male characters in the *Lienüzhuan* provide such women with honours and benefits in return for their submission. In this instance, the wife of Bao is provided an honorary title and honoured in her village by the Duke of Song (宋公).

4.2 Bo Ji, Wife of Duke Gong of Song (卷四之二宋恭伯姬)

Long after Bo Ji and the Duke of Song married, and the duke had died, a fire started at night in the palace.⁶⁰⁹ Bo Ji would not leave the palace, even as it burnt, because the Matron and the Governess were not present. Propriety dictated that those two women should be present, and, without them, she could not leave the house. Bo Ji stayed in the place and was killed in the fire. Bo Ji's death was grieved by everyone and private individuals indemnified Song for the cost of the damage. Liu Xiang comments that she 'fulfilled her utmost duty of wifehood'.⁶¹⁰ That a woman would pay the price of death for maintenance of rules that prevent her physical freedom of movement, and be exalted for it, is the ultimate gender tyranny. This demonstrates the irony of Liu Xiang's text and all successful models of oppression; they make it admirable for women to submit. Women become willing participants in their own subjugation.

When it came time for Bo Ji and the Duke of Song to attend the ancestral temple and assume their roles as husband and wife, Bo Ji would not go as the Duke of Song had not originally come to fetch her.

⁶⁰⁸ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 60–1.

⁶⁰⁹ LN 4.2; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 103. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 68.

⁶¹⁰ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 105.

4.6 Meng Ji of Duke Xiao of Qi (卷四之六齊孝孟姬)

On a pleasure trip the Duke of Qi was undertaking to visit his concubines, his wife Meng Ji's cart had an accident.⁶¹¹ Meng Ji considered it was dangerous to linger outside the city walls without protection. Although it is not the current focus of this thesis, it is interesting that the space outside the city walls was considered dangerous. The duke's wife presumably travelled with an escort of some kind, possibly with some armed men, and could not have been without any protection whatsoever. More relevantly, from what was protection required?

The duke sent a four-horse chariot to bring Meng Ji. However, when it arrived to carry her, she said that a royal wife must pass the threshold of the gate in a cart with seats and curtains on four sides. As a chariot has no seats or curtains, she would not enter it. Yet, she did not want to stay in the wilderness unprotected. The duke's men returned to get a cart for her but, in the time this took, Meng Ji tried to commit suicide. Her governess revived her, the cart arrived, and she re-joined her husband. As with Bo Ji above, the preference for death over non-observance of the proprieties demonstrates two things;

- 1) Liu Xiang's love of extreme measures in what seem quite regular and manageable situations; and
- 2) the level of commitment women are supposed to demonstrate to propriety is very high.

Liu Xiang again depicts an extreme reaction from his female that which appears out of proportion to a seemingly simple problem, namely an inappropriate carriage. Mou states Meng Ji's decision-making here demonstrates a commitment to the rites.⁶¹²

Modern voices may say Meng Ji—or, rather, Liu Xiang—has a penchant for exaggeration. In Liu Xiang's text, however, and in the Han Dynasty context, the behaviour, while extreme, was emblematic and applauded. Female virtue was exalted in all its extremity. Women who protected their own virtue through violence (or threatened violence) against themselves were

⁶¹¹ LNZ 4.6; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 107. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 72.

⁶¹² Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 49.

applying the standard to the maximum.⁶¹³ They are lauded by Liu Xiang as models to emulate.

It is worth noting that the speech attributed to Bo Ji by Liu Xiang mirrors that delivered by Zhang Chang (張敞) in 61 BCE to the Empress Dowager Wang in response to her participation in hunting expeditions.⁶¹⁴ At the end of Meng's story, there is a note that a married woman should not ask about her brothers. O'Hara explains that to ask of one's brother might create a suspicion of incestuous relations.⁶¹⁵ This demonstrates there was no limit to the aspersions which could be cast upon women who communicated too freely.

4.8 *The Wife of Qi Liang of Qi* (卷四之八齊杞梁妻)

Qi Liang of Qi died when Duke Cheng (晉成公) invaded Chu.⁶¹⁶ His wife had no father, husband or son and no-one in her mother's house to help her preserve propriety, and for this reason she drowned herself.⁶¹⁷ This example indicates that a woman without family lacked identity and protection. The honourable option presented by Liu Xiang is to commit suicide, as a woman without family could not survive honourably. A woman has no place if she has no-one to serve and no-one to protect her; she is defined and exists only in relation to her family. Her rightful place is within that family and without it little remains. When compared with the tales of widows with children, such as Mengzi's mother, it demonstrates that without a supportive role to play, women had no role at all and no reason to exist.

4.9 *Bo Ying, Wife of King Ping of Chu* (卷四之九楚平伯嬴)

Bo Ying, wife of King Ping of Chu and mother of King Zhao of Chu (楚昭王), was taken along with the women of the imperial harem by the King of Wu when he was victorious over the state of Chu.⁶¹⁸ Bo Ying took up a sword and preached the separation of the sexes. This included that men and women should not touch when they pass objects, not share a mat when sitting and not share dishes, clothing racks or towels and combs. She also stated that licentious nobles far from home could not be trusted. In response to the approaches of the

⁶¹³ Consider how in *LNZ* 4.7 the wife of the Lord of Xi (息君) commits suicide to preserve her purity once taken by the King of Chu (楚王) to become his wife.

⁶¹⁴ Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 235, n. 53. *HS* 76.

⁶¹⁵ O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 111.

⁶¹⁶ *LNZ* 4.8; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 113. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 75.

⁶¹⁷ *LNZ* 4.8; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 114. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 75.

⁶¹⁸ *LNZ* 4.9; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 115. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 76.

King of Wu, Bo Ying threatened to kill herself as to have two husbands was disgraceful. The King of Wu relented and left her guarded in the women's quarters. As seen in other chapters of the *Lienüzhuan*, self-harm is a woman's only bargaining chip;⁶¹⁹ far be it from her to threaten the safety of others. Bo Ying here states:

The virtuous conduct of husband and wife is the firm beginning of man's relationship and the original of kingly instruction.

夫婦之道，固人倫之始，王教之端⁶²⁰

The modern western or Chinese woman is more likely to expect Bo Ying to run the King through with his sword.⁶²¹ Women's agency was different in the warring states period and Bo Ying works within the strictures of her time. Liu Xiang arguably inserts a story of suicide to maintain chastity to satiate his conservative agenda.⁶²² Hinsch argues that Liu Xiang,

hoped to legitimate new ethical views by projecting them back into the past and attributing them to ancient women of high birth.⁶²³

Because of her actions, Bo Ying is left alone by the King of Wu, and the state of Qin came to Chu's aid and restored King Zhao. This story and the suicide threat by Bo Ying are an example of the amendments Lu Xiang makes to the historical stories to further his agenda.

4.10 Chaste Jiang of King Zhao of Chu (卷四之十楚昭貞姜)

Jiang's husband King Zhao of Chu left on a pleasure trip.⁶²⁴ While he was absent the river rose, and he sent for his wife lest the river flood the palace. In sending for his wife the king sent an official; however, Jiang would not leave the palace as the official did not have the seal of commission and she drowned.⁶²⁵ The king subsequently gave her the title Jiang the Chaste. Again, we see the common theme of self-sacrifice to preserve a woman's rightful role in the hierarchy. A wife obeys her husband and ensures his order is genuine via reliance

⁶¹⁹ The scene is reminiscent of the fictional standoff between Elizabeth Woodville and the young King Edward IV in the *White Queen* authored by Philippa Gregory, with the exception that Elizabeth has no such aversion to a second husband.

⁶²⁰ LNZ 4.9; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 115. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 76.

⁶²¹ Influenced perhaps by the impressive martial arts skill of female characters in the wide variety of Chinese films set throughout Chinese history, including times when elite women's feet were broken and bound such that martial arts would have been a dream only for them.

⁶²² Hinsch, 'Composition of *Lienüzhuan*', p. 18.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ LNZ 4.10; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 117. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 78.

⁶²⁵ For an examination of the seal of commission see Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 73 n. 75.

on an official seal. Her obedience is absolute and inflexible. The instances of female sacrifice in the *Lienüzhuan* promote the suppression of personal motivation and emotions in determining individual agency. Liu Xiang would have readers believe this should be a core aspect of Han Dynasty culture. The exaltation of this behaviour cements female roles and success when it places self-interest below all other considerations. A woman's rightful place is one of obedience and self-immolation.

8.14 *The Favourite Beauty Ban* (卷八之十四班婕妤)

Considering the fame of Ban Jieyu, and that Liu Xiang was her contemporary, it is not surprising she warranted an entry into the supplementary biographies of Liu Xiang.⁶²⁶ Liu Xiang praises her understanding and reasoning before providing a brief backdrop to her becoming Beautiful Companion. Liu Xiang tells us that Ban Jieyu entered the imperial palace as an eleventh-rank concubine.⁶²⁷ She famously refused to ride with the emperor in his carriage, arguing that wise rulers rode with their ministers and only rulers who were seen as overfond of women, and thus ineffective, were accompanied by women in their carriages. Liu Xiang tells readers the Empress Xu publicly rejoiced in the virtue of Ban Jieyu. As Liu Xiang outlines, Ban Jieyu was slandered by Zhao Feiyan (趙飛燕). Although Ban Jieyu was able to acquit herself of any charges of witchcraft, she thereafter left to care for the Empress Dowager and removed herself from the imperial harem. Liu Xiang records a sympathetic prose poem authored by Ban Jieyu which bemoans her removal from the emperor.⁶²⁸ Ban Jieyu is presented as loyal to her one husband, sad at heart but not hateful as a result. It is not surprising that Liu Xiang contrasts the virtuous account of Ban Jieyu with his damning portrait of the Zhao sisters, in whom resentment abounds.⁶²⁹

The effect of the *Lienüzhuan*

Liu Xiang intended his text to influence and change Han Dynasty normative standards for women. He certainly succeeded. A new wave of conservatism based on Confucian principles took hold and meant that the future for many women down the centuries in China was curtailed. It is Liu Xiang's approach to widowhood which was the most revolutionary, yet it

⁶²⁶ LNZ 8.14, trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 230. Kinney, *Exemplary Women*, p. 168.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ LNZ 8.14, trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 232–5.

⁶²⁹ LNZ 8.14 and LNZ 8.15.

is his treatment of widows that reminds readers that the text is didactic and focused on the practise of elite women.

A Han Dynasty legal case demonstrates that Liu Xiang's moralistic approach to women was not commonly accepted. Michael Nylan has translated and commented on this legal case from Zhangjiashan. The case dates to around 190 BCE and concerns a widow. The woman's husband died, and she was in mourning with her mother-in-law, during which time she had consensual sex with a man in the room adjoining that in which her husband's body lay. Her mother-in-law reported her to the officials. The initial decision concluded this act was unfilial and sentenced her to grain pounding (hard labour) and shaving of the head. Upon review this was overturned, on the basis the court would not examine actions taken after the husband had died. It was said that cheating on a dead husband was not a crime. Further, the decision noted that if the husband were alive and caught his wife he would beat her, and no charge would be pursued, or sentence imposed.⁶³⁰ The Qin Dynasty legal approach discussed obligations owed to the state and was sensitive to any impact behaviour had on state interests, such as supply of a fit labour force. In the Han Dynasty, however, there is a shift, with inappropriate actions—even those that have no direct impact on the state—become the concern of the state.⁶³¹

This shift raises interesting questions regarding private and public spheres of Han Dynasty life and the complications of obligations after death. Nylan draws a contrast between the Han Dynasty legal tradition here and the later Tang and Song legal tradition, in which the woman would have certainly been punished. Yet, in the Han Dynasty, the widow appeared free to marry as soon as her husband dies.⁶³² That this legal decision contrasts strongly with later Han Dynasty literary works such as the *Lienüzhuan* demonstrates a significant shift in cultural norms, or that the *Lienüzhuan* wished to shift cultural norms significantly.⁶³³

Nylan states that it is hard to believe that Tang concepts of filial piety differed so greatly from Han Dynasty ideas.⁶³⁴ The eight-hundred-year time difference between the 190 BCE

⁶³⁰ Michael Nylan, 'Notes on a Case of Illicit Sex from Zhangjiashan: A Translation and Commentary', *Early China* 30 (2005–2006), pp. 27–33. See also P.R. Goldin, 'Han Law and the Regulation of Interpersonal Relations: "The Confucianization of the Law" Revisited', *AM*, Third Series, 25.1 (2012), p. 17.

⁶³¹ Goldin, 'The Confucianization of the Law', p. 18.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

decision and the Tang Dynasty makes such a comment redundant. It appears that even within the Han Dynasty concepts of filial piety changed dramatically.⁶³⁵

Nylan suggests that the Han Dynasty context of different households for different generations, such that not all members of the same extended family lived together, may help explain the different approach. That is, the mother-in-law who reported the woman was not the head of the family and likely lived elsewhere.⁶³⁶ In any case, the outcome in this case is that widows were free to marry immediately upon their husband's death and had no obligations to their patrilineal family.⁶³⁷ It may also be significant that no son is mentioned. Although widow chastity was idolised at elite levels, this was not widespread, and the case reveals 'how little opprobrium was attached to serial remarriage in the laws and customs of western and eastern Han'.⁶³⁸ People at different levels of society may have evaded or ignored the prescribed mourning obligations and, by implication, various other legal and cultural expectations.⁶³⁹ Applying Liu Xiang's approach to the widow, she would certainly have been condemned. Thus, Liu Xiang's text can be seen as separate from the practices of everyday members of Han Dynasty China. As Ban Gu states, it is the very elite of the elite which interests Liu Xiang.

As has been seen with the examination of the legal case in Zhangjiashan, the reality of everyday widows' actions and legal obligations were in stark contrast to the women Liu Xiang crafts.⁶⁴⁰ That later dynasties took a different more 'conservative' approach to widows is likely testament to the endurance of Liu Xiang's text.

With the centralisation of the empire and a single imperial court in which imperial women were surrounded and supported by their families—unlike prior state-based systems, where women moved away from their families in marriage or concubinage—the Han bureaucracy (of which Liu Xiang was a member) reacted against increased consort family power. Placing limits on consort power must have been a way to save the increasingly fragile Han

⁶³⁵ Indeed, take for example modern shifts in China in the last 150 years.

⁶³⁶ Nylan, 'Illicit Sex from Zhangjiashan', p. 40.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Dynasty.⁶⁴¹ It was for this reason that women's physical, financial and sexual identities were circumscribed in the *Lienüzhuan*.

Liu Xiang's work was to forever shift Chinese biography and create a genre in its own right—women's biography,

In the subsequent centuries, men issued numerous editions of Liu's collection to communicate desirable characteristics of women, while women, emulating Ban, authored and/or revised moral tracts to instruct correct female behaviours and comportment.⁶⁴²

The majority of dynastical histories going forward incorporated a Lienü component.⁶⁴³ It also had a lasting influence on Han court life, as we see Ban Zhao replicating and condensing the themes of Liu Xiang's roles for women into a simpler and more practical guide to elite female success. Although Li Xiang's work can be seen as both promoting and binding women in the Han Dynasty, at least Liu Xiang does recognise women as having valuable contributions to make. In contrast, the virtuous women encountered in his text, who included learned, technically skilled and rhetorically adroit women, gradually disappeared from records as Chinese history progressed.⁶⁴⁴ Indeed, in the *Lienüzhuan* women exercise the same intellectual skills as men.⁶⁴⁵ Whether or not this truly elevates their gender is, however, questionable when they often use those intellectual skills to minimise the scope of their involvement. Raphals is perhaps too positive in her reading of the *Lienüzhuan*, as while women might ultimately be allowed an opinion, Liu Xiang makes clear that their role is a supportive one and for the furtherance of their own agendas.

⁶⁴¹ Hinsch, 'Composition of *Lienüzhuan*' p. 22.

⁶⁴² Joan Judge and Hu Ying (eds.), *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: Global, Area, and International Archive, 2011), p. 55.

⁶⁴³ Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, p. 178.

⁶⁴⁴ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 5.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Chapter Eight. The Writings of the Ban Women

There is ample evidence that women in Han Dynasty China were involved in the political decisions and political sphere of their respective societies. What is not widely available is female authorship.⁶⁴⁶ There is, however, Ban Zhao (班昭) (45–116 CE),⁶⁴⁷ whose writings provide clear insight into the view women had of themselves and the world around them. Ban Zhao is a realist and she demonstrates loyalty to virtues that ultimately enabled her readers to navigate the existing cultural milieu they found themselves in. Ban Zhao demonstrates how women can obtain respect (and thus, arguably, power) within a family unit.

Ban Zhao was a member of the Ban family, a family of high status, wealth and education whose members had held various offices in the imperial court through the generations. The *Hanshu* was a familial enterprise started by Ban Zhao and Ban Gu's father and continued by them both. Swann believes that Ban Zhao shared compilation of the tenth treatise and an essay on astronomy and that she contributed up to a quarter of the *Hanshu*.⁶⁴⁸ It is interesting that the *Hanshu* does not contain any annals of emperors beyond the interregnum of Wang Mang, despite Ban Zhao completing it in her lifetime, by which time a further seven Emperors had succeeded to the throne.

The Ban family were members of the Han Dynasty's elite, made up of scholars and officials.⁶⁴⁹ Ban Jieyu, Ban Zhao's great-aunt, was a member of the imperial harem and a concubine of Emperor Cheng.⁶⁵⁰ This great-aunt won the favour of the empress dowager, an alliance that served her well when she lost the favour of the emperor.⁶⁵¹ The Ban family

⁶⁴⁶ For instance, in Rome there are no surviving historical works from a woman in the relevant time of this thesis, although it is worth noting Empress Agrippina Minor (mother of the Emperor Nero) wrote a history of her own family as attested by Tacitus, *Annals* 4.53, which survives only in fragments. Tacitus no doubt used her memoirs as a source.

⁶⁴⁷ There are also three poems from Cai Yan (蔡琰). H.H., Frankel, 'Cai Yan and the Poems Attributed to Her', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 5, No. 1/2 (1983), pp. 133–56. Cai Yan's poetry (putting aside debate over authorship) and personal accounts of her own experience being taken captive by Xiongnu and living among them then later returned. See also Chang, K.S. & Saussy, H. (eds.), *Women Writers of Traditional China – An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 22.

⁶⁴⁸ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 65. *HHS* 84 attests to Ban Zhao finishing the work.

⁶⁴⁹ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 128.

⁶⁵⁰ Swann, *Pan Chao*, pp. 25–48 and Y.S. Chen, 'The Historical Template of Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', *TP*, 2nd ser. 82.4/5 (1996), p. 241.

⁶⁵¹ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', p. 241.

included members who were close to the Imperial family and the emperor; Ban Zhao's great-uncle edited and catalogued old books for the imperial collection, her grandfather served as an advisor at court and her father was an advisor and military officer under Emperor Guangwu.⁶⁵² The Ban family connections within the imperial court and to the imperial family, in addition to both Ban Zhao and Ban Jieyu's access to high-level education, equipped them well for authorship.⁶⁵³ It is not surprising, then, that Ban Zhao's work might be viewed as a hybrid of conservative and pragmatic texts.

Ban Jieyu's poetry

Ban Jieyu was a daughter of Ban Kuang (班况), the great-grandfather of the historian Ban Gu (班固). As we have seen, Ban Jieyu was thought worthy to warrant a short biography by her great nephew, Ban Gu, in his *Hanshu* and she also merited inclusion in Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan*. The focus in both texts is Ban Jieyu's actions in the imperial court and her status as concubine to the Emperor Cheng—that is, how her life related to the emperor. Given the scholarly achievements of her immediate relatives, her elder brother Ban Bo, her great-nephew Ban Gu and her great-niece Ban Zhao, it is likely that Ban Jieyu was in receipt of a formidable literary education. Certainly, such education would have made her eligible for admission into the imperial harem. Considering this education and the scholarly efforts of her relatives, it is not surprising Ban Jieyu produced poetry. This is particularly so when her great-nephew reports she regularly recited poetry exalting female virtue.⁶⁵⁴ Swann sees Ban Jieyu and her literary exploits as inspiring her niece Ban Zhao.⁶⁵⁵

Knechtges has stated that the title of first female poet in the Han Dynasty must go to Ban Jieyu.⁶⁵⁶ This is due to the number of works attributed to her, which make up a significant body of work. Ban Jieyu is now credited with three poetic works.⁶⁵⁷ One of the poems, *Yuan Ge Xing* (怨歌行) or *Song of Resentment*, is written from the perspective of a court lady who describes a fan used by her lord. As Knechtges translates:

⁶⁵² Ibid., pp. 241–2.

⁶⁵³ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 51.

⁶⁵⁴ HS 97B.3984.

⁶⁵⁵ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 42.

⁶⁵⁶ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 130. Significantly, Ban Jieyu is the first poetess in Chang & Saussy, *Women Writers*.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

Newly cut white silk from Qi,
 Glistening and pure as front and snow:
 Made into a fan of “joined for joy”,
 Round, round as the bright moon.
 It goes in and out of my lord’s breast and sleeve;
 Waved, it stirs a breeze.
 I always fear autumns coming,
 When chilling winds dispel blazing heat.
 Then it will be thrown into a box,
 And his love will be cut off midcourse.⁶⁵⁸

新裂齊紈素，
 鮮潔如霜雪。
 裁為合歡扇，
 團團似明月。
 出入君懷袖，
 動搖微風發。
 常恐秋節至，

It has been asserted that the silk fan is Ban Jieyu herself, who was, the argument goes, discarded by Emperor Cheng. The fan is thus a metaphor for abandonment.⁶⁶⁰ Indeed, it has been said to represent the abandonment of a wife by her husband.⁶⁶¹ This autobiographical reading has been popular throughout history.⁶⁶² The above is a very intimate and yet still general piece of poetry that may reflect on men’s feelings and women’s concerns. It speaks to the imbalance between men and women by virtue of sexual access and privilege. Allowing the biographical reading, Ban Jieyu is discarded by the Emperor Cheng and this occurs in part because the emperor, as a man of means, has access to many women vying for his attention and affection. The poem merely makes plain the consequence of this inequity for women. It is important to note that there is debate regarding the authenticity of the poem and

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 131. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 232.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 131. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 232.

⁶⁶⁰ Knechtges, ‘Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban’, p. 134.

⁶⁶¹ Lee, ‘Familial Agency in Ban Zhao’, p. 63, n. 5.

⁶⁶² Knechtges, ‘Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban’, p. 132. Zhong Rong states she successfully captured a woman’s sentiments. Yuefu *Shiji* 43.626–32.

its attribution to Ban Jieyu due to the style appearing more reminiscent of the Six Dynasties era that followed the Han Dynasty.⁶⁶³

Another poem attributed to Ban Jieyu, *Zidao Fu* (自悼賦) or *Rhapsody of Self-Lament*, is more personal.⁶⁶⁴ Chang and Saussy consider it to be highly charged with emotion.⁶⁶⁵ It contains biographical detail of Ban Jieyu and outlines (in a vein similar to Ban Zhao) many womanly virtues. Knechtges outlines that the reference in the text to a lady scribe may in fact be a female tutor.⁶⁶⁶ Indeed, Ban Zhao and Ban Jieyu's promotion of female virtues may be an extension of court tutoring. Knechtges states that during Emperor Cheng's reign, Cai Gong (蔡隴), gave instruction on the same to the empress, and that such instruction may have constituted training in womanly conduct.⁶⁶⁷ In this poem, Ban Jieyu referred to malicious favourites, mirroring Liu Xiang's focus on such self-interested women, when she used the phrase 'hen who crows'.⁶⁶⁸ Knechtges states that Ban Jieyu uses the famous saying to denote a woman who has improper control over the court or her husband's household.⁶⁶⁹ She uses the example of Bao Si, wife of King You. Interestingly Bao Si is included in Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan* as an example women of the imperial court should not emulate.⁶⁷⁰ It is likely that Ban Jieyu used this example to reflect poorly on the Zhao sisters.⁶⁷¹

In contrast, Ban Jieyu praised the daughters of the sage ruler Yao (堯), who married them to Shun, Lord of Yu (虞舜).⁶⁷² Ying and Huang were known for their humility, frugality, intelligence and marital devotion.⁶⁷³ As Knechtges highlights, Ban Jieyu used didactic representations of moral conduct, namely paintings of virtuous women, as her guiding mirrors.⁶⁷⁴ Rather than accepting her fate happily, Ban Jieyu rails against her isolation and

⁶⁶³ Chang & Saussy, *Women Writers*, p. 18.

⁶⁶⁴ HS 97B.1188–9. Note that as the poem is included in the *Hanshu* the attribution is supportable.

⁶⁶⁵ Chang & Saussy, *Women Writers*, p. 18.

⁶⁶⁶ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 139.

⁶⁶⁷ HS 97B.3990.

⁶⁶⁸ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 139.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

⁶⁷⁰ LNZ 7.3, trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 189. Liu Xiang states the Zhou dynasty was ruined by Tai Si and Bao Si. See Hinsch, *Women in Early China*, pp. 109–10.

⁶⁷¹ Chang & Saussy, *Women Writers*, p. 21.

⁶⁷² LNZ 1.1a–2a and 8.14. Discussed in Mou, *Gentlemen's Prescriptions*, p. 35.

⁶⁷³ LNZ 1.1a–2a and 8.14. Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 140. Mann, 'Presidential Address', p. 840.

⁶⁷⁴ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 138.

loneliness, dissatisfied with her remoteness from the imperial palace and Emperor Cheng. She also takes aim at the Zhao sisters who replaced her.⁶⁷⁵ Ban Jieyu's *Zidao fu* provides a clear insight into the difficulties faced by women in the imperial court. Relegated to waiting for the emperor to visit them, facing the difficulties of childbearing (and child loss) and the political machinations of other concubines made it a dangerous place to reside.

In Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan*, he includes the entire poem with editorial comment.⁶⁷⁶ All that Ban Jieyu supposedly espouses in her poem *Zidao fu* suits Liu Xiang's purpose all too well. We can identify self-sacrifice, virtue through care for the empress dowager, love for the emperor and subservience to others. As Liu Xiang identifies, however, caring for the empress dowager also provided safe refuge from ambitious rivals. It is these rivals that Liu Xiang offers for our negative attention, calling Zhao Fei Yan proud and envious.⁶⁷⁷ Here again, although we may have one poem that speaks to Ban Jieyu's experience and her intent, as it is extracted by Liu Xiang these are obscured by his own *modus operandi*.

Knechtges questions the authenticity of the *Yuan ge xing* poem, based in part on the fact that Liu Xiang did not include it in his supplementary biography of Ban Jieyu.⁶⁷⁸ It may very well be that the *Yuan ge xing* was not the work of Ban Jieyu, and it is not within the scope of this thesis to decide either way.⁶⁷⁹ However, reliance on the fact that it is not included by Liu Xiang overlooks the purpose of the inclusion of the *Zidao fu* in the supplementary biography. This is not due to any attachment to Ban Jieyu or her poetry on Liu Xiang's part, but rather because the *Zidao fu* suits his didactic purpose perfectly while the *Yuan ge xing* does not; it is dissatisfied and does not communicate any of the themes which interest Liu Xiang or that he wished to promote.

Knechtges attributes the text's survival to the Ban family, saying that Ban Jieyu's works would not have survived at all.⁶⁸⁰ The latter is certainly true. Considering that Liu Xiang lived in the same period as Ban Jieyu and authored his *Lienüzhuan* before the birth of Ban Gu, it may be worth considering whether Liu Xiang is in some way responsible for the *Zidao*

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 143.

⁶⁷⁶ LNZ 8.14; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 232–4.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 232.

⁶⁷⁸ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 133.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 133. Indeed, from the examination of Knechtges it is entirely likely Ban Jieyu did not author the *Yuan ge xing*.

⁶⁸⁰ Knechtges, 'Poetry: Favorite Beauty Ban', p. 144.

fu. It is suspicious that the text delivers so precisely what Liu Xiang desires. The alternative is that Ban Jieyu did author the *Zidao fu* and that both she and Liu Xiang were, as members of the imperial court, disapproving of the growth of consort clan power. The reaction against the Zhao sisters may have been common in the imperial court, especially among those old families who relied on their status and familial bonds for their place at court and in the hierarchy. This would explain why both Ban Gu and Liu Xiang see consort power as a reason for the interruption of the Liu Dynasty by Wang Mang.⁶⁸¹ This equally helps explain the similarities between Liu Xiang and Ban Zhao's text. Further, as contemporaries within the imperial court, surely Liu Xiang would not have been able to create an entire poem and attribute it to Ban Jieyu. In the elite circle of the imperial court where Liu Xiang wrote, many of his readers, including the then-Emperor Cheng, knew Ban Jieyu, and it seems more likely the poem was the genuinely her work. There was a cultural movement against new consort power by the more established families of the imperial court towards the end of Emperor Cheng's reign, and it is likely Ban Jieyu and Liu Xiang's thinking was aligned regarding this issue. Perhaps assisted by the change in discourse, the decline of consort families would take place with the rise of eunuchs and officials within the Han Dynasty System, culminating in Cao Cao (曹操) and his rise to power at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty.⁶⁸²

Nüjie (女誡)

Ban Zhao wrote a book of advice for women, *Nüjie*. This has traditionally been viewed as a strictly Confucian text, which should not surprise considering the importance of Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. Certainly, the *Nüjie* is concerned with women and how they should behave. In this way, the *Nüjie* engages with the traditional view of women as the inferior sex who were exemplars of humility and virtue.⁶⁸³ The most significant role it advises on is that of the wife. The text was written specifically for women and was written by a woman, making it possibly unique in the ancient world.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸¹ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 134. Clark states that the positioning of Ban Jieyu's biography with Wang Mang's aunt and other less honourable women of the imperial harem offers the reason as seen by Ban Gu for the Liu demise.

⁶⁸² Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, pp. 220–1. T'ung-tsu Ch'ü notes that Cao Cao's power pre-existed his daughter becoming empress; that is, his power was not derived from the consort.

⁶⁸³ Dull, *Han Social Structure*, p. 49.

⁶⁸⁴ *NJ* 7; trans., Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 82.

As discussed above, Liu Xiang's text, although focused on women, is arguably targeted to men (or one man) for the appraisal of women. Thus, it is quite different from Ban Zhao's text. The *Nüjie* is often thought to reflect the gender divisions created by the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, and thus encouraged women (wives) to serve men. It is also heavily indebted to the *Liji* (礼记) or *Book of Rites*.⁶⁸⁵ Further, it was likely influenced by texts which we do not have today, which formed part of a didactic literary form concerning women.⁶⁸⁶ In contrast to the expansive canvas the *Lienüzhuan* provides its characters (and readers), the *Nüjie*, with its instructive tone (rather than teaching by example), focuses on a much smaller but likely more realistic female world, namely, the world within the husband's family.⁶⁸⁷

It is too tempting to pass up the observation that, as an early widow, Ban Zhao may have had little recollection of how irritating serving one's husband might be. Yet this is what the *Nüjie* promotes, female service of others. Ban Zhao was a widow who did not remarry. Such constancy can be viewed in two ways: as embodying the model of chaste widow bowing to Confucian ideals or, on the other hand, as providing freedom from male domination for Ban Zhao.⁶⁸⁸ The text does advocate education for girls.⁶⁸⁹ It is certain that Ban Zhao, and presumably most women of her class and situation, were educated, and this is something she argues for. The *Nüjie* can be seen as an argument for female education couched in an acceptably conservative text.⁶⁹⁰ Again, this is not shocking; as the conservative force of Confucian theory demands acceptance of each person's place within a hierarchy, it would be unthinkable for *Nüjie* to stand apart from this tradition.⁶⁹¹ Certainly, Swann accurately places Ban Zhao in the Confucian tradition. Ban Zhao focuses on family roles and passive submission.⁶⁹² So much of Chinese history and culture is reworking and nuancing what has gone before that it was never possible for Ban Zhao to deliver a treatise that might speak to

⁶⁸⁵ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 7.

⁶⁸⁶ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 124. The *Nüxian* (女憲) is one example of a text which did not survive but to which Ban Zhao refers and was likely influenced by. Further, Ban Zhao was charged with producing *Nüshizhen* (女師箴), *Admonitions from the History of Women*. This raises the question whether Liu Xiang was heavily indebted to Ban Zhao.

⁶⁸⁷ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 23.

⁶⁸⁸ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 8. Nylan, 'Confucian Piety and Individualism', p. 3.

⁶⁸⁹ *NJ* 8; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 84. Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 178.

⁶⁹⁰ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 345.

⁶⁹¹ De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), pp. 820–1.

⁶⁹² Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 5.

readers of this thesis, and any expectation that it should be deluded and destined for disappointment.

An alternative argument to this purely traditional view has been put forward by Yu-Shih Chen, who argues that, in fact, Ban Zhao's work should be viewed as a practical guide to navigating the difficulties of entering a new family upon marriage.⁶⁹³ Thus, the *Nüjie* could be viewed as providing women with survival skills.⁶⁹⁴ Chen specifically states that Ban Zhao is not a Confucian and that her text is not an endorsement or espousal of Confucian theory.⁶⁹⁵ Chen appeals to the reality of imperial family life, to which Ban Zhao was close. Chen appears to hint here at the Daoist leanings of Empress Deng. Certainly, Ban Zhao could be perceived as a realist, demonstrating how to navigate a Confucian world rather than necessarily agreeing with that world. In view of her context and the content of the *Nüjie*, however, it is difficult to see the text as other than submitting to the general principles of Confucian theory.

Ban Zhao does not significantly challenge the status quo for Han Dynasty women. Having regard to the subtlety of the Confucian tradition, this is not surprising. Against Chen is the argument that the *Nüjie* cannot be understood except within its Han Dynasty Confucian context.⁶⁹⁶ Swann stated that Ban Zhao,

assumed the superiority of man over woman as a matter of course, just as she did that of the old over the young, whether man or woman.⁶⁹⁷

That is, Ban Zhao in her text affirms sexual difference and male superiority.⁶⁹⁸ Indeed, the inferiority of a newly married woman to nearly every person in her new marital family is made explicit by Ban Zhao. As has been discussed previously in this thesis, the concept of equality as valuable was meaningless in Han China. However, that Ban Zhao does not challenge the hierarchy or the nature of social relationships at play does not mean she endorses them. How can readers ever uncover the private feelings of ancient authors? Ban

⁶⁹³ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*'.

⁶⁹⁴ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 53.

⁶⁹⁵ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', p. 231.

⁶⁹⁶ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 51. Although Lee makes a very valid point here regarding the need for contextual analysis, she states the later Han Dynasty spanned the period 600–200 BC. This glaring error rather undermines her arguments.

⁶⁹⁷ Swann, *Pan Chao*, pp. 133–4.

⁶⁹⁸ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 53.

Zhao's context was one in which women were more at the forefront, perhaps, than they had been recently. As has been discussed already, several factors—such as centralisation of the government post-unification and the model of the imperial family—assisted in female political power. This meant empresses contemporary to Ban Zhao, such as Empress Dowager Dou (formerly empress to Emperor Zhang, r. 88–92 CE) and Empress Dowager Deng (r. 105–121 CE) held power and had a vested interest in the portrayal of women.

As Chen has highlighted, the context of the imperial court was one of intrigue, violence and murder.⁶⁹⁹ It was a highly competitive place in which strategy was vital to survival.

The Families that were known to Pan Chao bore little resemblance to that harmonious networking of filial piety and feminine docility which is so central to the making of a stable Confucian world order. Families like the extended royal family were an extremely dangerous environment for their members. Correct positioning of oneself in that Labyrinthine complex of human relationships, and masterful manipulation of power alliances within the extended familial hierarchy, just to survive, as Pan Chao learned for herself as well as for her royal pupil Empress Teng Sui 鄧綏, required as much calculation, intelligence, and political and military skills as it did a minister at court of a general in the field.⁷⁰⁰

This certainly does not seem a place well suited to Confucian theories such as harmony and female docility.⁷⁰¹ Although Chen is correct in her analysis of Han Dynasty imperial politics and its machinations, that does not mean that Ban Zhao's text is not Confucian. Confucian theory underpinned Han Dynasty thought, particularly as the dynasty aged. It provided an external reference for women to abide by to ensure approval.

The strategy of Ban Zhao, then, is to not disturb the social order and the age- and gender-based hierarchy, which the individual cannot change but only work as efficiently as possible within it while protecting herself. On this basis, if subservience is expected of a daughter-in-law then, based on the superior power of her in-laws, it is in that woman's best interest to acquiesce to the status quo to win their favour.

⁶⁹⁹ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', p. 231.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Comparisons have been made between the principles found in the *Nüjie* and those espoused by Sunzi (孙子) in his *Sunzi bingfa* (孙子兵法) or *Art of War* and Laozi in his *Daodejing*.⁷⁰² Certainly, Sunzi promotes strategy for overcoming opponents, and that strategy is frequently not to merely attack. Similarly, rather than be abrasive with her husband and his family, a new wife must subordinate herself to win their favour. It is worth noting that Chen argues that Ban Gu (and by extension the Ban family) was more influenced by Daoism and certainly did not promote Confucian ideals.⁷⁰³ This view, however, cuts the story short; the *Nüjie* is brimming with Confucian underpinnings, and acceptance of the principles of Han Confucian theory is apparent throughout.

Ban Zhao's motivation

Of interest in the examination of any historical text is the motivation of its author. As an instructress, Ban Zhao possessed the education, time and opportunity to turn her hand to writing as she wished. This certainly accounts for how she achieved the *Nüjie*, but the text is so very precise and measured it is likely she must have had some other purpose than idle interest.

It has often been suggested that Ban Zhao wrote the text to educate her unmarried daughters.⁷⁰⁴ This is the explanation Ban Zhao provides to her readers. The date of authorship or publication is generally thought to be 106 CE. It was a text written in what the Han Dynasty would have considered her later life. Ban Zhao tells us she was married at 14 and at the time of authorship was likely in her early 60s. This would make any children from her short-lived marriage likely too old to be unmarried, newly married or expecting shortly to become married.⁷⁰⁵ As a result, many have looked further afield for the daughters Ban Zhao refers to. Raphals translates the sentence as referring to unmarried women of her family, suggesting a broader than nuclear family.⁷⁰⁶ In view of the importance of family clans within the Han Dynasty, it makes sense that Ban Zhao's text might be aimed at young Ban women. This raises the question of whether she has female grandchildren in mind. It is

⁷⁰² Ibid., p. 240.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., p. 243.

⁷⁰⁴ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 82.

⁷⁰⁵ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 55.

⁷⁰⁶ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 236. Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', pp. 126–7, suggests the term *zhu nü* used by Ban Zhao refers to not daughters but girls in Ban Zhao's family.

just as likely, however, that Ban Zhao in referring to daughters simply aimed to personalise her relationship with her readers.⁷⁰⁷ Personalising the relationship of author and reader would add strength to the words of the *Nüjie*. Regardless of whether the text was specifically for grandchildren or young female relatives in the Ban clan, Ban Zhao's familial context clearly influenced the text. Her brothers Ban Chao and Ban Gu were likely much older than she and, thus, she likely experienced a full family home with sisters-in-law who had to adjust to the Ban family ways.⁷⁰⁸

Chen suggests that the *Nüjie* was published in the year 106 CE, when Empress Dowager Deng, Ban Zhao's pupil, took the throne as regent for her young son, Emperor An.⁷⁰⁹ The purpose, then, may be to positively impact on the perception of Empress Deng and her new powerful role and safeguard against attacks based on her gender.⁷¹⁰ By cloaking female agency as subservient behaviour acceptable under the precepts of a Confucian worldview, the role for women in *Nüjie* is arguably enhanced while simultaneously contained. This interpretation of the *Nüjie* is the most credible given the proximity of Ban Zhao and the Empress Dowager Deng. This is particularly so when we consider the recent context of Empress Dowager Deng. The most notable female regent prior to her was Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang). The Dou clan had become very powerful militarily following their defeat of the Xiongnu in 89 CE but were removed in a coup d'état shortly thereafter. Surely Ban Zhao and Empress Dowager Deng had the recent example of Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang) in the minds. Despite the demotion of the Dou Clan and the discovery of Emperor He that he was not the biological son of Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang), he did not remove her honours and maintained her place of burial next to his father, Emperor Zhang. This may have been because of Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang)'s behaviour towards him.

In 96 CE, when Empress Deng first entered the palace, she also came under the tutelage of Ban Zhao. According to Chen, Empress Deng's rival, Empress Yin (陰皇后), lacked the guidance of Ban Zhao and this was instrumental in her involvement in an ill-advised plot that resulted in loss of her position.⁷¹¹ Following the demotion of Empress Yin, Ban Zhao's teachings assisted Empress Dou as she was made empress by Emperor Zhang. The death of

⁷⁰⁷ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 55.

⁷⁰⁸ This is mentioned by Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 87.

⁷⁰⁹ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', p. 244.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Emperor He in 105 CE resulted in the young Empress Dowager Deng becoming regent. Indeed, Empress Dowager Deng ruled as regent throughout the reigns of Emperor Shang (殤帝) (r. 106 CE) and Emperor An⁷¹² until her death, at which time Emperor An was aged 27.⁷¹³ It can be no coincidence that Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* is thought to have been written around this time. As a powerful woman, Empress Dowager Deng likely sought assistance from her long-time tutor, Ban Zhao. The *Nüjie* is a Confucian text, but it is also designed to assist women and, in particular, one woman, Empress Dowager Deng. Seen in this light, it is arguably a piece of political propaganda.

As propaganda, it is testament to female strength throughout the ages that Ban Zhao and Empress Dowager Deng made use of Confucianism's patriarchal theory to provide a template of female virtue that, although about submission, supported the ultimate expression of female power in Han times—regency.⁷¹⁴ The *Nüjie* then can be seen as an attempt to protect Empress Deng from the insinuations made about Empress Lü, who had no authoress by her side to fight her battle throughout history and suffered the lack of one.

The *Nüjie* is much more than mere propaganda, however. It clearly draws on Ban Zhao's own experience as a young bride and from her own reflections based on her experience at court. Empress Dowager Deng had climbed from being a concubine to being empress while her rival Empress Yin was demoted and died. Ban Zhao's exposure to the imperial court likely clarified for her the importance of female behaviour in affecting outcomes for women. A sceptical view of court politics would indicate that following precepts alone is not sufficient to result in a rise to the position of empress and that Empress Dowager Deng likely employed a variety of techniques and strategies to obtain and maintain her position. The *Nüjie* does not claim to provide a roadmap to imperial power but, rather, for achieving respect within a family unit. The two are related, but they are not the same.

It is important to note that any notion of female agency must be understood within Ban Zhao's context. Any concept of agency as understood by what might be broadly termed modern western culture is an inappropriate and alien one when it comes to examining Han

⁷¹² Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 39 notes that it appears Empress Dowager Deng ruled the Han Dynasty for 16 years. Note this is likely longer than Empress Lü, who ruled for roughly 15 years. For a review of the account of Empress Dowager Deng according to Fan Ye, see Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', pp. 65–70.

⁷¹³ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 61.

⁷¹⁴ Note that *HS 23 Treatise on Law and Punishments* (刑法志) makes it clear that Empress Deng heard court cases herself, pardoning many including former Empress Yin for her crimes.

Dynasty China and Ban Zhao's text.⁷¹⁵ Han Dynasty China was not an individualistic society and the Confucian approach to life demonstrates this clearly. Rather, social harmony and gender hierarchy were achieved through constant referral and recognition of relationships to others. Lin-Lee Lee has argued that Chinese women's agency has been traditionally collective, rather than individual.⁷¹⁶ Thus, for Han Dynasty women agency only had expression through promoting the wellbeing of the family.⁷¹⁷ Taking this into account challenges the way in which readers and historians today view the *Nüjie*. Because it is about women, and prescribes behaviour for women, it is viewed as a part of gender history. The Han Dynasty was gendered, but not in the same way. The *Nüjie* should arguably be viewed as not only a text about women but also as a text that engages with virtues which apply to both genders and rites which must be maintained by all.⁷¹⁸

What does the *Nüjie* text reveal?

Much of the scholarship regarding the *Nüjie* has focused on whether the text is good or bad for women.⁷¹⁹ Making a bold value judgement diminishes the complexity of the text and reveals too clearly the views of the historian. Examining the *Nüjie* in its context reveals much to readers, namely the place of women, how Confucian ideas were evolving in the Han Dynasty and the political landscape Ban Zhao inhabited. It is also important to see the *Nüjie* as the didactic and aspirational text it is. The *Nüjie* is not an accurate record of common practice but, rather, a prescriptive account of what practice should be.⁷²⁰

Ban Zhao introduces herself and the *Nüjie* to her readers in her preface. It is clear from the introduction that she is setting forth the basis upon which she is qualified and able to provide guidance as contained in the *Nüjie*. Importantly, Ban Zhao reveals some of her own literary education and family background, referring to her scholarly father Ban Biao (班彪). Significantly, Ban Zhao locates herself in familial relationships: daughter to Ban Biao, wife

⁷¹⁵ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 48.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 10.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

⁷²⁰ Lily Xiao Hong Lee, 'Ban Zhao (c. 48–c. 120): Her Role in the Formulation of Controls Imposed Upon Women in Traditional China', in her *The Virtue of Yin: Studies on Chinese Women* (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony, 1994), p. 22.

to a man of the Cao (曹) family, mother to an identified son and, of course, an elderly widow. As discussed above, there is a mention of daughters generally but no specific daughters.

Thus, from the very commencement of the text it is clear than Han Dynasty women (like Han Dynasty men) are to be located within their familial hierarchy. Ban Zhao locates herself for her reader in that familial sphere, rather than referring to the imperial court positions she held. Ban Zhao also announces in her text that she is advanced in years and experiencing ill health and likely to die. The *Nüjie* is thus also powerful in a way which echoes the power of Xiwangmu; the text invites the reader to interpret it as the last dying instruction of a soon-to-be ancestress. It is likely a falsehood or exaggeration, as Ban Zhao did not die until nearly ten years after the *Nüjie* is believed to have been written. Further, Ban Zhao was aged in her early sixties at the time of completion and, considering her elite status and privileged lifestyle, she was not likely to die soon without a specific cause.

Ban Zhao intended for readers to take her text seriously and use it in everyday life. It is a practical guide extrapolating Confucian theory to the everyday experience of young women entering married life. It also promotes female virtue and, arguably, had a political purpose for the regent Empress Dowager Deng. In Ban Zhao's introduction, she acts out the humility she also preaches in her text. Ban Zhao refers to herself as careless and by nature stupid.⁷²¹ Neither of these comments can be true, considering her elevated position at court and the skill demonstrated in writing the *Nüjie*. It is a false modesty. Thus, Ban Zhao employs extreme humility and self-effacement to enhance her standing as an author.

Through establishing her seniority to her readers and positioning herself as a teacher providing instructions to pupils who Ban Zhao states may humiliate their ancestors and clan, she creates a winning combination specifically designed to elicit compliance from her contemporary reader. Considering the analysis above concerning the motive for writing the *Nüjie*, Ban Zhao also may be attempting to distract from the real motivation for authorship—namely, to bolster Empress Dowager Deng in her regency—by appealing to family ties which contemporary audiences well understood. The purported instruction to her daughters cannot be accurate. As outlined above, any children from the marriage to her late husband would not have well past marriageable age in 106 CE. Swann posits that Ban Zhao refers to young female relatives and women more broadly.⁷²² The appeal to kinship structures and

⁷²¹ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 82.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, p. 91, n. 11.

ancestors is an intimate one, providing the appearance of an intended audience made up of grandchildren or students. This elevates Ban Zhao's text as one of guidance from elder female relative to younger female relatives.

The *Nüjie* is divided into seven concise chapters, each outlining certain desirable conduct for women. The first chapter, addressing *bei ruo* (卑弱) or humility, orients readers at the beginning of female life and commences by referring to alleged practices of 'ancient' peoples regarding male children. This echoes the clever appeals we see in the introduction to Ban Zhao's text. Again, she appeals to tradition, age and ancestors as a source of legitimate instruction. These are sources of guidance contemporary readers would have felt at ease in following in their everyday lives. It also, as Kelleher highlights, taps into a conservative trend in Chinese culture.⁷²³ From the beginning of life, Ban Zhao positions a female child as lowly and weak, humble to all others and, through the gift of a potsherd, located within the household.⁷²⁴ Women are to practise humility, be domestic and undertake ancestor worship.⁷²⁵ Indeed, Yang argues that perhaps the potsherd was a symbol of weaving, as the spindle used for weaving at the time was ceramic.⁷²⁶ This demonstrates to readers that her text is not revolutionary, that is, she is accepting the current social norms and status of women.

Ban Zhao next advocates female work within the home, thereby promoting industriousness. This hints at the reality for many women. Be it running a large wealthy household or a simple home, then as now domestic tasks were time-consuming, more so for Han woman where the administration of a large household was involved, or the chores associated with a small one were labour-intensive. In many ways, Ban Zhao's ethos of activity mirrors the puritanical basis for the modern principle 'you are what you do'. Female industriousness for Ban Zhao is not, however, conducted for its own sake (nor does it offer self-fulfilment); it is for the sake of the family and, of course, the husband. As Liu Xiang has shown, female work in the textile industry could bring economic wealth to the family and, if necessary, provide in the absence of a male 'breadwinner'.

⁷²³ Theresa Kelleher, 'Women's Education', in De Bary & Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999), p. 820.

⁷²⁴ *NJ* 1; trans., Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 83. Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', discussed also at p. 53.

⁷²⁵ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 53.

⁷²⁶ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 177.

In Chapter One, Ban Zhao states that women who follow her precepts of humility will be honoured by others. Here there is a glimmer of female identity—that is, if women are subservient to the family and behave with humility they will receive praise and be viewed favourably by others. This makes clear the aim is not only humility for humility's sake, or other good actions for their own sake, but for the sake of receiving acknowledgement that they were performed. Confucian action here is always contextual; action is not performed in Ban Zhao's text for its own sake but as a means to an end.

Chapter Two is concerned with husband and wife, *fufu* (夫婦). It should be clear from the analysis so far that *Nüjie* is a conservative familial text. It is concerned with a family unit and the role of women within that unit, particularly within marriage. Ban Zhao advocates subservience of women to their husbands; similarly, husbands must control their wives.⁷²⁷ In view of the broad acceptance of concubines, it is likely that Ban Zhao views each concubine as a wife. This means each woman, regardless of exact status, should view themselves through the prism of husband and wife relations (as defined by Ban Zhao).

In Chapter One, Ban Zhao promotes female subservience and this, too, is echoed in the relations of husband and wife in Chapter Two. This is nothing remarkable about this. Even today this finds frequent approval across the world. Ban Zhao also demands that husbands be worthy of service. This is an interesting statement to make. It positions the marriage bond as the source of the family's success. It also appears to suggest an element of reciprocity in the marriage relationship. A wife must serve her husband and a husband must be worthy of her service. This mirrors the classic *yin* and *yang* relationship, to which, indeed, Ban Zhao also refers.⁷²⁸ It is a relationship of mutual interdependence, but not one of equality. In this way, gender and sexual distinction as presented by the *Nüjie* are the result of nature.⁷²⁹ *Yang* is rigid and *yin* is yielding, Ban Zhao tells us.⁷³⁰ In other texts in the beginning of the Han Dynasty, *yin* is not always female and *yang* is not always male; rather they represent relationships of 'firm' and 'yielding', such that a minister is *yin* and the ruler *yang*.⁷³¹ Even

⁷²⁷ *NJ* 2; trans., Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 84. This is consistent with earlier writings; see, for instance, Mengzi (Mencius) who promoted wifely subservience. Wang, *Images of Women*, p. 103. *Mencius*, trans Bryan Van Norden 3B3.2.

⁷²⁸ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85.

⁷²⁹ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 144.

⁷³⁰ *NJ* 3; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85. It is worth noting that the *yin* and *yang* theory likely only became a basis for subordination in the early Han Dynasty. Wang, *The Way of Heaven and Earth*, p. 107, discusses Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) as the theorist behind the subordination of *yin* to *yang*.

⁷³¹ Wang, *The Way of Heaven and Earth*, pp. 107–8.

if *yin* is not always female, however, it is always subordinate to *yang* in the Han Dynasty, and as the dynasty progresses *yin* becomes more strongly associated with the female.

Yang has argued that most studies of Ban Zhao have focused excessively on the husband's control of the wife and the wife's submission in the *Nüjie*, to the point that a woman's relationship to her natal family is ignored.⁷³² The reason for this is simply that the *Nüjie* makes only a few fleeting mentions of a woman's natal family; its focus is on the marital home and the marital family. It is thus not surprising that studies of Ban Zhao and her *Nüjie* focus on the relationship of husband and wife, given this is what Ban Zhao herself focused on. Women in the Han Dynasty maintained strong relationships with their natal family; indeed, Empress Dowager Deng and Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang) are testament to this. Ban Zhao, however, chooses the marital, not the natal family, and for good reason. Focusing on the natal family would likely only undermine Empress Dowager Deng and Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang), not assist them. It is thus not surprising that Ban Zhao's own view (and possibly one echoed by her brother) is found in the *Hanshu*.⁷³³

It is in Chapter Two that the argument for female education is found, an element of Ban Zhao's text that is often remarked upon as the most radical. Yet Ban Zhao cleverly constructs the argument in the least threatening way. Put simply, men study histories and books to enable them to learn how to control the family; women must study those same texts to learn how to serve the family. Ban Zhao here refers to Confucius himself in the argument.⁷³⁴ This returns us to the *Nüjie*'s place as a Confucian text and Ban Zhao's tendency to use what is safe and acceptable to provide certain nuances to assist her agenda, in this instance female education. Nevertheless, within Chapter Two Ban Zhao advocates for education for women along similar lines to that provided to men. This education is not, however, to provide liberation for women; it is, in Ban Zhao's own words, to enable them to be better wives.⁷³⁵ Education will ensure proper behaviour and submission to the social hierarchy.

⁷³² Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 15. Certainly, Yang accurately identifies that Ban Zhao's own life reveals her ongoing close bond to her natal family.

⁷³³ In the memorial of Wang Mang an imperial edict states, 'Verily when the relationships between husband and wife are correct, then father and son love each other and human relations are stable' [詔曰：蓋夫婦正則父子親，人倫定矣]. *HS* 12.7a; Dubs III, p. 78.

⁷³⁴ *NJ* 2; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85. *Analects* 20.3.

⁷³⁵ *NJ* 2; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85. Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 55. Note that Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 125, states Ban Zhao argues for no distinction of class as well as gender in education. This overreaches, as Ban Zhao's worldview is a gendered one and the education of women for which she argues is not the same as that provided for men. This is because the *Nüjie* maintains gendered roles

In the political context of the Han Dynasty, consort families had so risen in power that Ban Zhao's own aunt had sought refuge with the Empress Dowager Cheng. Promoting the education of women would ensure that a lack of education in a potential wife, empress or concubine would be a negative. A more educated woman would likely adhere to the classical texts she was taught, including the *Nüjie* itself and its commandments. Education of women was an elite privilege and not something to which former slave girls and dancers such as the Zhao sisters could aspire. Perhaps Ban Zhao believed her focus on an educated wife would result in women who worked within the system rather than attacking its pediments. This sits neatly within the concerns of the officials that consort families were too powerful and that undesirable elements had entered the imperial court.

In Chapter Three, 'respect and caution', *jing shen* (敬慎), it is also made clear that women and men are complementary though different identities. Male and female, like *yin* and *yang*, are not the same, nor should they be. There is a duality whereby male strength is positioned as opposite to female gentleness. Chapter Three is only concerned with the husband and wife relationship, and it is thus women who must exercise respect and be cautious in their action. Ban Zhao quotes what she claims is a common saying, which Swann translates as:

[A] man though born like a wolf may, it is feared, become a weak monstrosity; a woman though born like a mouse, it is feared, may become a tiger.⁷³⁶

This reveals a tension throughout *Nüjie* in ensuring women do not overstep what is perceived as their 'natural' place. Ban Zhao quickly turns away from the saying to the conduct women should aspire to, respect and acquiescence. Swann translates *shun* (順) in the third chapter as compliance, whereas Chen prefers a meaning more in line with the self-preservation the chapter (and, indeed, the entire text) promotes.⁷³⁷ It is clear from the Chapter Three that Ban Zhao regards men and women as entirely different.

Chapter Three turns considers husband and wife relations at length and remonstrates against too much intimacy in marriage. Male and female spaces (bolstering the argument that the Han enacted female and male segregation in private and public spaces) are separate and married couples should spend time separated from one another. Ban Zhao posits that if

within the home and marriage; thus, women must be taught the rites to be good wives. It is then questionable whether they would be educated in the remaining knowledge passed on to men.

⁷³⁶ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85.

⁷³⁷ Chen, 'Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh*', p. 246.

married couples spend too much time in each other's company, lust will follow. From this, liberties will be taken, and improper language will arise between them resulting, ultimately, in disrespect from a wife to her husband. Chinese marriage should be governed by ritual. Thus, Ban Zhao, echoing the example of Mengzi and his wife, states:

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.⁷³⁸

The marriage Ban Zhao promotes is one in which relationships are bound by rules of propriety and boundaries.

It is interesting that, in certain places, the emphasis Ban Zhao places on mutuality between husband and wife breaks down when error occurs. That is, there will be fault with the wife if licentiousness in a marriage occurs, but not, it seems, with the husband. It appears that Ban Zhao accepts the stereotype of woman as seductress, preferring to promote women and wives who are of moral fibre and have a serious rather than sexual role in the family unit. It also speaks to the restraint expected in a Han Dynasty marriage. Out of too much intimacy and time spent together comes a closeness that arguably renders each party susceptible to the comments of the other. Certainly, intimacy can create strife in relationships because of the vulnerable position individuals place themselves in.

Having regard to the issue of wives versus concubines, it is also possible that Ban Zhao is ensuring that a wife is indispensable to a husband because she ensures his home life runs smoothly, rather than the fact he finds her particularly attractive or sees her as sexually desirable. It is easy to imagine Ban Zhao and Liu Xiang both commenting that beauty or sexual desirability may change like the wind, but virtue will remain steadfast. A wife, even an imperial one, could lose her position to a concubine. Thus, maintaining the status quo in a marriage was a serious priority for women. In view of Ban Zhao's last comments in Chapter Three, preventing the destruction of marriage is on her mind. Part of this concern for preservation then flows seamlessly into chapters four and five.

Chapter Four 'womanly qualifications', *fuxing* (婦行 [妇行]) addresses the standards which women must attain. The four areas or qualifications Ban Zhao identifies are all concerned

⁷³⁸ NJ 3; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 85. For reference to Mengzi see LNZ 1.11; trans O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 41.

with simplicity. The four qualifications are womanly virtue, womanly words, womanly bearing and womanly work.⁷³⁹ Ban Zhao states that women need to use language that is simple rather than clever or diverting. Lee sees this as advice regarding the rhetorical importance of silence and the need to use the right words at the right moment.⁷⁴⁰ The implication is that simple language will suffice, rather than lengthy speeches which may weary others.⁷⁴¹ Certainly sometimes economy of words will be taken more seriously than verbose expression. The undertone with the first qualification—and one which is demonstrated throughout the chapter—is that women should not attract unnecessary attention by their actions. Unsurprisingly, Ban Zhao also recommends modesty, cleanliness and that women organise the food for guests.⁷⁴²

This brings us to the main dichotomy in Ban Zhao's text. She invites readers to follow her guidance in order to be honoured by others. Yet women must rely on the scrutiny of others for their good conduct to be noticed, while also ensuring their behaviour does not attract attention. If nothing else, this certainly provides a challenge for her readers. It also reveals a tension between two concepts, one of which Ban Zhao surely favoured. The reference to gaining the honour of others may be a technique to attract readers to the text. Or does it make plain that Ban Zhao and her readers expected a degree of attention from male counterparts, such as husbands, that was already finely attuned to female behaviour, which would mean that behaviour—whatever it was—would be noticed?

Ban Zhao continues, stating that women need not excel in their work; good work will suffice, modesty must be observed, vulgar language avoided, and simple cleanliness maintained. These actions speak to avoiding behaviour that may bring undue attention from others. A cruel analysis of women's role here as outlined by Ban Zhao might indicate the submission of the individual to a code of conduct that masks any personality traits in favour of robotic behaviour. But that criticism stems from an individualism of which Ban Zhao's readers were generally ignorant. Ban Zhao ends Chapter Four with a quote from the *Analects*.⁷⁴³ The reference indicates Ban Zhao believes that learning the way is only possible if one is truly

⁷³⁹ *NJ* 4; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 86.

⁷⁴⁰ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', pp. 54–5.

⁷⁴¹ *NJ* 4; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 86.

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*

⁷⁴³ *Analects* 7.30 and 1.2.

committed. This comment serves to give hope to readers and inspire their conviction and actions.

Chapter Five, titled ‘wholehearted devotion’, *zhuanxin* (專心 [专心]) returns to the significant role of women—that of wife. Ban Zhao begins by reminding readers of a principle with which they would already be familiar. A man may remarry but there is no provision for a woman to do so. Ban Zhao also makes an analogy between the relationship of husband and wife and that of heaven and the people of earth. Thus, the husband is heaven and the wife are the people of earth. Heaven punishes the people of earth when they do not follow the spirits of heaven.⁷⁴⁴ Further, a husband is a wife’s most important audience. Ban Zhao refers to the *Nüxian* (女憲) or *A Pattern for Women*, which states it is the crown of a woman’s life to obtain the love of one man, whereas to lose it is to miss the aim in a woman’s life.⁷⁴⁵ It is worth noting here that one man (and a husband at that) is the aim, not all men or a man chosen by a woman. Ban Zhao was on solid and righteous territory here herself, and Empress Dowager Deng and Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang) were likewise widows who never remarried.

In Chapter Five the recurring theme of Chapter Four, women being simple and not drawing attention to themselves, reappears. Women should be inconspicuous when they go outside their homes, Ban Zhao instructs her readers. Also interesting is the prohibition against women assembling in groups. The implication is that women together gossip. In contrast to most of the *Nüjie*, Ban Zhao provides in this chapter an example of conduct not to follow, namely, being frivolous, dishevelled and slovenly within the home, and not to emphasise one’s femininity outside of it.⁷⁴⁶ The aim here appears to be preventing women coming to other men’s attention; thus, emphasising femininity to attract attention is not permitted.⁷⁴⁷ This is familiar territory throughout many cultures. Ban Zhao also issues a directive to women to conduct themselves and dress appropriately, indicating an implied responsibility for the actions of men. In Ban Zhao’s text, acting contrary to this is a failing that does not meet the required standards.

⁷⁴⁴ *NJ* 5; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 87.

⁷⁴⁵ *NJ* 5; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 87. Lee, ‘Familial Agency in Ban Zhao’, p. 54. Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 124. Note that *Nüxian* did not survive for modern readers; only two excerpts remain by their inclusion in Ban Zhao’s *Nüjie*.

⁷⁴⁶ *NJ* 5; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 87.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter Six, ‘implicit obedience’ or *qucong* (曲從 [曲从]), commences with a repetition of the quote from the previous chapter stating that the aim of a woman is to obtain the love of one man, with failure to do so a disgrace. The quote perfect encapsulates something problematic in theoretical texts offering guidance, by providing guidance absent of context. As Ban Zhao herself would have been very aware, it is possible a woman may follow the guidance of her text to the character and yet lose the love of her husband. The impossible standard Ban Zhao demands may ultimately have been corrosive to the identity of many Han women. The line of thought that if only I change myself he will behave better, love me more, stop beating me etc., only works in certain discrete marital examples or where the husband is acting in accordance with the prevailing culture.⁷⁴⁸ This is tempered, however, by Ban Zhao earlier stating that a husband must be worthy.

Chapter Six focuses on the importance of mothers-in-law. It is made clear in this chapter that even if a mother-in-law (or, by extension, perhaps other superiors in the hierarchy) provides an incorrect direction, a daughter-in-law (or woman) must nevertheless follow that direction.⁷⁴⁹ The chapter ends with a quote from the ancient text concerning female obedience; the aim is to be a daughter in law who is ‘is like an echo and shadow’. This, Ban Zhao states, will lead to praise.⁷⁵⁰ Although Empress Dowager Deng, as regent, was no longer an echo and shadowed no-one, Ban Zhao states that a wife and daughter-in-law must. As has been seen in the examination of Han Dynasty culture in this thesis, ageism was prevalent in Han Dynasty China. An inseparable part of the culture was an age-based system of discrimination, with elders were at the top of the hierarchy. This provided a belief system to enhance the control parents often already have over their offspring. It is only through the death of a husband and his parents that women could obtain a level of independent agency in the *Nüjie* or in Han Dynasty China.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven is titled ‘harmony with young brothers- and sisters-in-law’, *shumei* (叔妹) and provides advice to women regarding a husband’s siblings. Interestingly, Ban Zhao places the support of brothers- and sisters-in-law as central to obtaining parental approval. She also states that, once aware of this fact, it is stupid not to act accordingly to seek the affection of such siblings-in-law. Ban Zhao admits that women are more likely to

⁷⁴⁸ This, of course, reflects a modern view that individuals are responsible predominantly for their own behaviour and not always for the behaviours of others.

⁷⁴⁹ *NJ* 6; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 88.

⁷⁵⁰ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 88.

make mistakes than a disciple of Confucius.⁷⁵¹ In this chapter Ban Zhao again promotes subservience, such that even if the newly married woman's rank is equal to or higher than another family member, such as a younger sister-in-law, she must not use this position to her advantage. Such action stemming from arrogance will cause disharmony and blame. Ban Zhao makes clear that any poor behaviour of the new daughter-in-law will disgrace her own parents and her new husband. That is, she is the reflection and embodiment of their virtue and stature, rather than her own. Again, women are an expression of others and not just themselves. It is thus most apt that Ban Zhao describes a good daughter-in-law as an echo and a shadow.⁷⁵²

It is as though the *Nüjie* and the *Lienüzhuan* are a two-pronged attack, one that deals on a personal and practical level with what action women should, can and cannot take. Ban Zhao states how the world is; a woman must enter a new household to which she did not formerly belong. She cannot rely on the bonds of blood to find her place; rather, she must depend on ensconcing herself within her new family. The way she does this is by accepting her subservient position and pandering to those in her new family. Liu Xiang would agree with the contents and Ban Zhao's text, but he focused on the broader cultural context and historical basis for the desirability of this behaviour. As Hinsch states, the *Nüjie* is the practical guide and the *Lienüzhuan* the theory.⁷⁵³

Ban Zhao's theoretical exercise in political propaganda does nothing for a woman truly in difficulties in her marriage and yet, with its broad sweeping language, it promises to do so. Although there has often been a feminist tint applied to the achievements of Ban Zhao, there is ultimately nothing feminist about the contents of her text, nor should we expect there to be. It is not a revolutionary text taking to task the underpinning hierarchy of Han Dynasty society. Rather, it defines woman only in relation to others, demands subordination of female agency in every respect and offers women only themselves to blame if the world around them does not immediately react positively to their actions. The content of the text can be separated from the purpose of it. If, as this thesis explores, the *Nüjie* was written to define a clean Confucian model for Empress Deng, then its aim ultimately helped one woman; the question is whether it did so at the cost of many others. The contrary view is that Ban Zhao's

⁷⁵¹ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 89, n. 82. Ban Zhao uses the example of Yan Hui (顏回), also referred to as Yanzi (顏子).

⁷⁵² *NJ* 6; trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 88.

⁷⁵³ Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, p. 125.

admonitions make perfect sense for Han Dynasty women because they enable agency in the only way possible: via sacrifice of opinion to win the hearts of a woman's in-laws and husband, which in turn strengthened and elevated her status within the marital home.⁷⁵⁴ Seen in this way, the *Nüjie* provides the tools for women to succeed within their Han Dynasty marriages.⁷⁵⁵

Other Writings

Ban Zhao was also responsible for authoring a range of other texts, poems, a commentary on the *Lienüzhuan* and letters.⁷⁵⁶ Yet it is the testimonial written for her brother Ban Chao that is perhaps most interesting. The letter petitions Emperor He to consider releasing her elder brother from his official post at the extremities of the empire.⁷⁵⁷ The letter lists her elder brother's achievements while posted to the frontier; these range from fighting in battle, to suppressing a revolt against Ban Chao's predecessor, to ensuring alliances with border states. As Ban Zhao tells us, these were in the past; Ban Chao has resided on the frontier serving the emperor for thirty years and he is now aged seventy.

Ban Zhao details her brother's current condition, advising that his hands are powerless, he is ill, has grey hair and has lost his teeth. Rather than relying on empathy from the Emperor He, however, Ban Zhao appeals to self-interest. She argues that if Ban Chao is not relieved there may be conspiracies, rebellion and disorder. If this happened, Ban Zhao states, her brother would not be up to the challenge. It is clear, also, that Ban Chao has previously petitioned the emperor himself to leave the post but has for three years received no mandate from the Emperor allowing him to leave. Ban Zhao then appeals to the Emperor's sense of responsibility, praising his governance of the empire. Further, she makes plain her worry that her brother may die there and expresses a wish he may return alive to see the imperial palace and not die in the sandy desert.

⁷⁵⁴ Lee, 'Familial Agency in Ban Zhao', p. 57.

⁷⁵⁵ Whether all women of the Han Dynasty agreed with those tools and the *Nüjie* is open for discussion. Apparently Ban Zhao's sister in law Cao Fengsheng (城父翁) took issue with the text. HHS 2792. Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 19.

⁷⁵⁶ Her most famous being the poem *The Cicada*, trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 101. She also authored *Bei zheng fu* (北征賦). These poems are largely personal, rather than presenting a didactic vision for readers.

⁷⁵⁷ Ban Zhao, *Plea for Her Brother's Retirement*, trans. Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 74. Similarly, Cai Yan (蔡琰) saved her husband from execution through speaking eloquently and persuasively to obtain her his pardon. HHS 84.2801.

Swann's analysis of the letter suggests that not only does it attest to female advocacy for male relatives, but that Ban Zhao's education and literary skill were very high,⁷⁵⁸ although this is perhaps unsurprising considering Ban Zhao was an elite woman from an eminent and educated family. It is important to note that elite women would often remonstrate with the emperor when there was no male relative to do so, as the *Lienüzhuan* demonstrates. The letter from Ban Zhao is carefully constructed per the polite forms for addressing the emperor, including appropriate diminutives and humble self-referencing.

Ban Zhao also outlines why it is in the emperor's interest to release her elderly brother from his official duties. Of much interest are the historical 'precedents' Ban Zhao cites supporting her petitioning of the emperor. These include two examples of women who intervened with the emperor on behalf of male relatives.⁷⁵⁹ The use of such precedents may indicate that her petitioning was unusual. It is sensible to see their inclusion as providing a good rationale for taking her request seriously. Also, in both examples the emperor's response to the female petitioners is viewed favourably. The examples attest to the acceptability of female input into decision-making and thus supported her attempt to persuade the emperor.

Ban Zhao petitioning on behalf of her brother, a close male relative, indicates the importance of familial units in the political realm. Certainly, Ban Zhao is not the only example of women petitioning and influencing the emperor. During the reign of Emperor Wen, the chief of the Treasury in the state of Qi was convicted and punished. His eldest daughter wrote a letter to the emperor offering to become a government slave instead of her father being punished.⁷⁶⁰ The emperor was apparently so moved to pity he abolished mutilating punishments of the kind her father would have received.⁷⁶¹ These examples suggest that where necessary, and where women were capable, they acted as political agents for others. Ban Zhao's petition was successful, further demonstrating that women could petition the emperor into action.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁸ Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 74.

⁷⁵⁹ Ban Zhao, *Plea for Her Brother's Retirement*, trans., Swann, *Pan Chao*, p. 76, n. 24. Chao Mu (259 BCE) and Wei Chi (685–643 BCE) are the examples she uses.

⁷⁶⁰ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 300; Nienhauser II, p. 170.

⁷⁶¹ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 300; Nienhauser II, pp. 170–1. The mutilating punishments were probably tattooing, cutting off the nose, cutting off the heel and possibly castration, Watson I, p. 300, n. 20. Nienhauser II, p. 171, n.191.

⁷⁶² *HHS* 47.

Chapter Nine. Imperial Women's Roles

Thus far this thesis has examined women (and woman) as mythological creatures and historical or literary characters while also examining what women should be. However, it is also important to reflect on what imperial women did, within the confines of the Han Dynasty sources available to us. In the Han Dynasty, imperial women were politically important and powerful. Living in the imperial household involved them in the business of government. Their proximity and intimacy made them conduits to, as well as representatives of, the emperor. Women were conduits of power; they produced emperors or were related to them. Their imperial familial ties necessarily made them politically important. This status gave them power, which also operated independently of the emperor. Nevertheless, their power was dependent on variables such as the age of the emperor, the strength of character of each imperial woman, whether she had eligible sons, and the number and political agility of her relatives.⁷⁶³

According to tradition, upon the death of the emperor, imperial women—particularly empresses dowager—were able to take over government in the event the heir apparent was not of age, and entitled to determine the dynastic succession in the event of no heir apparent having been appointed.⁷⁶⁴ The history of the Eastern Han Dynasty, according to Bielenstein, is a series of consort struggles wherein empresses dowager selected deliberately young heirs apparent whom they could control until, and even during, their majority.

For example, the Empress Deng selected a young heir apparent to enthrone (Emperor Shang) who quickly died, whereupon the Deng clan selected a younger son of Emperor An (notwithstanding that adult sons were available).⁷⁶⁵ Yet, possibly due to the influence of Ban Zhao or the success of the Deng family, Empress Deng is not viewed in the same way as Empress Lü. Upon the death of Emperor An, Empress Dowager Yen appointed a child emperor even though adult sons of Emperor Chang (漢成帝 [汉成帝]) remained, and Empress Liang Na (梁嬖), in consultation with her brother, chose two child emperors where adult heirs existed.⁷⁶⁶ Empress Dou Miao (竇妙) passed over adult candidates to be heir

⁷⁶³ M. Loewe 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE. Its Historical Setting and Effect on Han Dynasty History' *AM* 15 (1970), p. 169

⁷⁶⁴ Bielenstein, 'Wang Mang, Restoration of Han Dynasty and Later Han', pp. 282 and 283.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283. *HHS* 4.171, 173, 184l. *HHS* 23.819; *HHS* 40B.1385–6.

⁷⁶⁶ Bielenstein, 'Wang Mang, Restoration of Han Dynasty and Later Han', pp. 285 and 286.

apparent and enthroned a child, Emperor Ling (靈帝) (r. 168–189 CE).⁷⁶⁷ The purpose was likely to ensure her own regency was not threatened.⁷⁶⁸ Thus throughout the Dynasty empresses dowager preferred younger heirs apparent presumably in an effort to stabilise their power or that of their natal families. Loewe presents the image of emperors as helpless young men, coddled and surrounded by family and advisors.⁷⁶⁹ Loewe provides the examples of Emperor Zhao and Emperor Xuan, who reigned under the influence or direction of Huo Guang.

Helpmate to the Emperor

Imperial women, as wives, sister or mothers, could all be framed as helpmates to the emperor. This is consistent with the key role Liu Xiang and Ban Zhao would ascribe to women. It was the closest women to the emperor who were viewed as having intellectual and moral influence.⁷⁷⁰ This also arguably suited male historians, who could then blame moral corruption not on the emperor but on women who influenced him. Female assistance of men was, as can be seen from the *Nüjie* and the *Lienüzhuan*, an acceptable and laudable undertaking. It could take several forms, but perhaps the most notable is that of teacher. Just as Mengzi was indebted to his mother for the teachings she imparted to him, so female relatives or the emperor could, especially when they had age on their side, be persuasive in imparting ideology.

In this vein, Empress Dowager Dou (formerly empress to Emperor Wen) ensured that Daoist texts were required reading for the emperor, heir apparent and members of her family.⁷⁷¹ In this way she was both ideologically influential and a helpmate to the emperor.

Women were positioned by their familial proximity to influence the way of thinking for the imperial court and the emperor. Indeed, for women, as with others in the imperial court, a less capable emperor could be more easily led, controlled and ultimately act an imperial imprimatur for the decisions of others. As Loewe states,

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 287. *HHS* 7.316, 320; *HHS* 8.327; *HHS* 10B.445; *HHS* 69.2241.

⁷⁶⁸ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 35. Yang states Empress Dou ruled the Han Dynasty.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 6.

⁷⁷¹ Loewe, 'Cosmological Context of Sovereignty', p. 346, mentions this. *SJ* 49.1975 and *HS* 97A.3945.

it may also be noted that from the point of view of an ambitious official the ideal situation might well have been that in which the emperor was of tender years and subject to the immediate influence of a mother or a grandmother, herself a member of that official's family.⁷⁷²

Here Loewe, like other historians, continues to see imperial women as Ban Zhao and Liu Xiang characterised them.

The selection of a woman as an empress could be characterised as a 'weighty political and social affair'.⁷⁷³ Nevertheless, the empresses and consorts of the early Han were not subject to strict scrutiny, many were dancers for instance. Traditionally, the eldest son of the empress would become the heir apparent or the mother or an appointed heir apparent would be enthroned empress.⁷⁷⁴ As many empresses remained childless, there were substantial departures from this tradition.⁷⁷⁵ For instance, Emperor Ming had no children by his consort Empress Ma (馬皇后).⁷⁷⁶ The marriages between women of the imperial harem and emperors were not just personal relationships but also motivated by political ambitions.⁷⁷⁷

Obviously, the role of helpmate could be more substantial (and extend beyond educational influence) when emperors were in their minority and regency powers could be exerted, if not by men, then by women. Loewe notes that, after Emperor Guangwu (光武帝),

it is noticeable that a high proportion of the emperors of the Eastern Han had not attained their majority or were indeed infants.⁷⁷⁸

He also makes a wry comment that such junior emperors, 'personified the ideal of a ruler who practices *Wuwei*'.⁷⁷⁹ Certainly Empress Dou (竇皇后) took over government on behalf of Emperor He until he reached his majority.⁷⁸⁰ In this time, she delegated to her male relative Dou Xian (竇憲 [窦宪]) certain powers. Under the guise of helping the emperor during his reign as a child, the Dou clan controlled politics in the imperial court. This did

⁷⁷² Ibid., p. 348.

⁷⁷³ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 279.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 278.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 280.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁸ Loewe, 'Cosmological Context of Sovereignty', p. 347.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 348.

⁷⁸⁰ *HHS* 4.168; *HHS* 23.812 ff.

not change the fact that the 'legitimate' holder of power was ultimately Emperor He, who, upon reaching his adulthood, arranged the removal of Dou Xian.⁷⁸¹ No harm came to Empress Dou (Zhang) due to the bond created between her and Emperor He as her adopted son when she became Empress Dowager Dou.⁷⁸²

Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* indicates that Empress Song (宋皇后) entered the imperial court and shortly thereafter was established as empress, although the records indicate she did not hold imperial favour for long. Wang Fu (王甫), the powerful eunuch who was the Regular Attendant of the Interior, had caused Empress Song's paternal aunt to be executed and he feared the Empress Song harboured resentment against him for this. As such, Fu conspired with the Grandee of the Interior to claim that the Empress Song engaged in witchcraft. Emperor Ling (靈帝) believed the allegations and thus her seal and seal cord (symbols of her station) were repossessed. It is reported Empress Song retreated into a self-styled prison and died from grief. Fan Ye makes it clear that the emperor acted with haste in the affair and came to regret (or should have come to regret) his actions—inserting into his narrative a dream had by the Emperor in which the God on high is roused to anger due to the emperor's actions. Further, Emperor Ling died before he could remedy his wrongdoing. As Goodrich outlines, the use of dreams and wronged spirits in Fan Ye's text is more the stuff of fiction than historiography and tends to indicate, with other instances, that Fan Ye is an unreliable source.⁷⁸³ Nevertheless It is consort families, and consorts themselves, that are the perpetrators in this account; the legitimate Empress Song is vindicated as a martyr in the story and the Emperor played for a fool. Goodrich sees the account of Empress Song as a 'narrow glimpse of the treacherous and precarious life of the Later Han court during the period of its penultimate crisis'.⁷⁸⁴

Ancestor worship was of central important to Han Dynasty thinking and family ties were of primary focus. Imperial ancestry was (not surprisingly in a monarchy) vital. Providing this familial tie was one way in which women were helpmates to their respective emperor. Imperial women were often also used by their male counterparts to confer status or legitimacy upon important but not imperial men. This was only possible because imperial

⁷⁸¹ *HHS* 4.171, 173, 185; *HHS* 23.819; *HHS* 40B.1385–6.

⁷⁸² *HHS* 416. Emperor He refused to bow to pressures from officials to prevent Empress Dowager Dou from being buried with his father Emperor Zhang. Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 40.

⁷⁸³ C.S. Goodrich, 'Two Chapters in the Life of an Empress of the Later Han', *HJAS* 26 (1966), p. 191.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

women were politically important; they had cachet. The use of women to give status and create family ties between imperial and non-imperial male peers attests to female exploitation, but it is also testament to female political significance.

Unlike, for instance a monarchy within a monogamous kinship system, where the right to rule was based on having been born because of the marriage of one man and one woman, women in the Han were rarely direct providers of legitimacy in terms of bloodlines. The father, not the mother, of the child was the most significant. Once the paternity was acceptable, then women could be very useful.

In some instances, emperors owed not just legitimacy but their position directly to female elders. Emperor Ai (哀帝) (r. 7–1 BCE) owed his position to Empress of Emperor Yuan, Wang Zhengjun (王政君) and aunt of Wang Mang, in addition to Emperor Cheng's consort Zhao Zhaoyi (趙昭儀).⁷⁸⁵ Nevertheless, once he was enthroned Emperor Ai sought to remedy the abuses that had resulted from the power of the Wang family during his predecessor's reign.⁷⁸⁶ In other instances, the character of a mother may be a relevant factor when choosing a new emperor. This was seen with the selection of Liu Heng (劉恆) as Emperor Wen. Due to concerns regarding the power Empress Lü had wielded previously, the imperial court had regard to Liu Heng's mother in selecting him to become the new Liu emperor.⁷⁸⁷ The very first item for discussions in Ban Gu's annals of Emperor Wen is his heritage. The second sentence indicates that his mother was a concubine, Bo (薄).⁷⁸⁸

In Han Dynasty history, female relatives, particularly mothers, were viewed as a legitimate source of counsel for sons. This is supported by Liu Xiang's text and the primacy of mothers as the dynasty aged. It was the underlying virtue of filial piety that enabled maternal influence and made women helpmates to emperors. One clear example of this is when Empress Dowager Bo⁷⁸⁹ was able to influence her son Emperor Wen. The imperial court officials wanted to make him emperor following Empress Lü's death. The future Emperor

⁷⁸⁵ Loewe, 'Cosmological Context of Sovereignty', p. 347.

⁷⁸⁶ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 271.

⁷⁸⁷ *HS* 4; Dubs I, pp. 221f. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 137.

⁷⁸⁸ *HS* 4; Dubs I, pp. 221f., p. 226, n. 1 Dubs posits that the choice of Emperor Wen as a younger son was because the eldest grandson of Gaozu, the king of Chi, had a strong maternal family who could cause trouble in the same vein as Empress Lü.

⁷⁸⁹ A title she is given by her son; she was not an empress of Emperor Gao, Emperor Wen's father.

Wen discussed this with his mother.⁷⁹⁰ She was his political confidante and is presented as legitimately the person to whom he should turn. Sima Qian happily presents female political influence as a norm, revealing cultural attitudes to the relationship of women and politics. Ban Gu did not replicate such relationships.

Later in Emperor Wen's rule, Empress Dowager Bo suggested the mother of the heir apparent be made empress. Her suggestion was followed, resulting in the enthronement of Empress Dou.⁷⁹¹ Clearly this relates to one of the three avenues of power outlined by Jennifer Holmgren, the ability of mothers to choose a wife for their sons.⁷⁹² In this situation, Empress Dowager Bo and Empress Dou entered a reciprocal relationship wherein Empress Dou directly owed her current position to Empress Dowager Bo. The Empress Dowager Bo could effectively wield influence not only through her son but through the empress. This further increased her political influence.

Some women were granted influence by officials due to their position and status in Han Dynasty society and politics. This often occurred when it was unclear who would be the next emperor. Following Empress Lü's death, among those consulted when choosing the new emperor were the Marchioness of Yin'an (陰安) and the Queen of the late King Qing (頃) of Dai (代).⁷⁹³ These high-ranking and titled women are mentioned as part of the consultative process, attesting to female political influence. It is worth noting that this occurred at the beginning of the dynasty. With the death of the patriarch of the family, female influence on the transfer of power was significant. Politics is a tricky and dangerous game and, as such, while imperial women had a legitimate place in governmental and other decision-making they often encountered competition for influence. For instance, during the reign of Emperor Wu there was an attempt to remove the influence and reduce the power of the Grand Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang). Ban Gu tells us that,

the Grandee Secretary Cha Wan was sentenced for begging (the throne) that it should be forbidden to memorialise government matters to the Grand Empress Dowager.⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹⁰ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 286; Nienhauser II, p. 149. As a side note, Empress Dowager Bo (Formerly Lady Bo) can be seen as a foil for Empress Lü, in that she is the ideal mother whereas, which Empress Lü is not.

⁷⁹¹ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 293; Nienhauser II, p. 159.

⁷⁹² Holmgren, 'Imperial Marriage'.

⁷⁹³ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 288; Nienhauser II, p. 151.

⁷⁹⁴ *HS* 6.2b; Dubs II, p. 30.

This attempt was unsuccessful and those involved were killed, something probably testament to the power of Grand Empress Dowager Dou (Zhang). Clearly women held power, although the coercive force of literature and history would seek to diminish this as the dynasty progressed. Interestingly, historians have said that the court of Emperor Wen and Emperor Cheng was relatively free from direct interference in matters of state by an imperial consort or her relatives due to Empress Dowager Dou's predilection for Daoism.⁷⁹⁵ Indeed,

[h]er death in 135 B.C. can perhaps be taken as a turning point in Han politics, for it coincided with the close of a long period in which dynastic strength had been garnered and institutions modified to serve the needs of the empire.⁷⁹⁶

Her death, and the end of her restraining influence, has been seen as permitting a new, more active policy agenda in the reign of Emperor Wu.⁷⁹⁷

As the Eastern Han Dynasty imperial powerbase started to unravel, blame was sometimes placed on consort families. However, as Psarras has highlighted, consort families were at least preferred to the increasing power held by court officials, including eunuchs.⁷⁹⁸ This was in part due to their status as members of an elite inner circle into which their competitors, the eunuchs, had not been born. Interestingly, the role of eunuchs was expansive, and their powers could be vast because they could access areas of the palace from which other men were banned.⁷⁹⁹

Female relatives within the imperial court could petition the Emperor for assistance. When a daughter of Emperor Guangwu sought the assistance of Emperor Ming in the appointment of her son to an office, the request was refused on the basis it was necessary to put the correct person into the office.⁸⁰⁰ This may reflect the changes as the dynasty progressed, Emperor Ming reigning during the Eastern Han Dynasty.

⁷⁹⁵ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 138. Empress Dowager Dou (Wen). Direct interference in matters of state need to be contrasted with the internal dynamics of the imperial family in this instance.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷⁹⁸ Sophia-Karin Psarras, 'The Political Climate of the Later Han', *Journal of Asian History* 27.1 (1993), p. 16.

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁰⁰ *HHS* 2.124. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 294.

Female regency

As has been discussed previously, empresses or, in the event of the death of the emperor, an empress dowager often undertook the role of regent for a young emperor before he came of age.⁸⁰¹ Although female leadership was not encouraged, there were circumstances in which it was permitted.⁸⁰² Yang has calculated that six women in the Eastern Han Dynasty ruled as regents.⁸⁰³ Many of these empresses dowager did not rule as regent for their biological child but, rather, for a child of another consort who was then adopted by the empress dowager. Empress Dowager He arguably elevated the role of the eunuchs by ensuring their role as a go-between for her in her regency. As Fan Ye attests,

Since earliest times, the eunuchs have been in charge of managing affairs in the forbidden zones of the palace. They are part of an old Han tradition which must not be abolished. Furthermore, the late Emperor has just passed away: [now that I am regent,] how could I enter into direct contact with the civil servants in order to run the government?⁸⁰⁴

Eunuchs traditionally held much power and their members could hold high official positions. They could prove invaluable tools for female rulers faced with the logistical difficulties of ruling in the codified environment of the Han court. Psarras concludes that female regency reinforced the role of eunuchs.⁸⁰⁵

Women's misrepresentation in historical sources directly corresponds to whether they are viewed as legitimate or illegitimate in the political power they exerted. Some women in politics fulfil feminine ideals and are thus legitimated by the sources. Others fall outside the ideal and are damned. It is not surprising that the illegitimate is the more misrepresented category.

On many occasions throughout the Han Dynasty, only a male emperor in his minority was available and female regency in their stead was necessary. The first example of this situation occurs with Empress Lü and will be explored below.⁸⁰⁶ There was no prohibition against women

⁸⁰¹ McMahon, 'Women Rulers', p. 181.

⁸⁰² McMahon, 'Women Rulers', p. 182. As McMahon highlights, female rule was to fill a gap and women ruling even as emperor in China were never able to pass succession to female offspring.

⁸⁰³ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 36. She lists empress dowagers Dou, Deng, Yan, Liang, Dou and He.

⁸⁰⁴ Psarras, 'The Political Climate of the Later Han', p. 17.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ See page 216 onwards.

becoming an emperor; however, there were silent but persuasive normative cultural forces that acted to prevent female emperorship and instead encouraged occasional regency.⁸⁰⁷

Young emperors were increasingly common at the end of the Western Han Dynasty. Further, in the Eastern Han Dynasty when Emperor An died in 125 CE he was sixty-three or sixty-four years of age and his wife, who became Empress Dowager Yan, summoned the great grandson of Emperor Zhang to the throne. This Emperor Shao (少帝) died shortly after his accession. Another young emperor needed to be found, and Empress Dowager Yan summoned the sons of the kings to the capital to choose the next emperor. A eunuch, Sun Cheng (孫程), intervened and killed the empress dowager's family and its support base. Then Sun Cheng's appointee, Emperor Shun (順帝) (r. 125–144 CE), took the throne.⁸⁰⁸ It is worth noting that during the reign of Emperor An, the Yan family had similarly eliminated its rivals.⁸⁰⁹ It was only when certain criteria were fulfilled that female regency could occur. The main condition was that, for whatever reason, the emperor could not rule or rule effectively. This often occurred when an emperor was very young (i.e. unable to rule in his own right).⁸¹⁰

As the Han Dynasty aged, the power base of the emperor was eroded to the benefit of consort families and eunuchs, but arguably not to the stability of the imperial succession. Psarras has highlighted that of the twelve emperors Fan Ye examines, only three ruled in their own right.⁸¹¹ This suggests that Liu Xiang's text was not successful in its objective to confine female power. The role of the emperor was increasingly ceremonial and cosmological role.⁸¹² Thus female influence which depended on the emperor's power may also have diminished. Psarras concluded that instability in accession did undermine the dynasty but that the tension resulted from 'the fact that the new emperor was often not the son of the empress or regent'.⁸¹³ As many emperors in the Eastern Han Dynasty died before they named an heir, this created an issue upon their death which was often a cause of conflict between

⁸⁰⁷ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 61.

⁸⁰⁸ *HHS* pp. 2514–6.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁰ L.S. Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', *HJAS* 23 (1960–1961), p. 51.

⁸¹¹ Psarras, 'The Political Climate of the Later Han', p. 28.

⁸¹² For instance, Loewe, 'Cosmological Context of Sovereignty'.

⁸¹³ Psarras, 'The Political Climate of the Later Han', p. 28.

the mothers of the emperor's children and his empress.⁸¹⁴ If a concubine's child was chosen then the familial strength of the empress's family would likely result in the death of the concubine as the empress consolidated her empress dowager position and direct control over the young emperor and adopted him as her own. This tension exposes the limitations of the application of Liu Xiang's text. Succession and political stability were ill suited to the theories espoused by Liu Xiang. Further, of what assistance was his text if there were insufficient emperors produced to digest it.

Regency was fraught with logistical difficulties. As was seen with Empress Dowager He, direct contact between female regents and civil officials was not appropriate. This undermined the ties of personal obligation that might have bolstered the regent's position.⁸¹⁵ Psarras has stated that,

[i]n reality, the empress dowager had direct control only over the eunuchs. Her authority over the rest of the civil servants was delegated to a male representative, usually a member of her family. In the same way, her command of the army was strictly indirect, although control of the army was essential to the maintenance of power, especially during factional disputes.⁸¹⁶

Nevertheless, her role as empress and how she ruled had a definitive effect on future⁸¹⁷ imperial women in creating a precedent for female leadership and, as Yang argues, created customary law. Further, Yang states that the *Duduan* (獨斷) by Cai Yong (蔡邕) provides:

When the empress dowager serves as a regent, she will appear in the front hall to receive the officials; she [will be seated] facing east and the young emperor facing west. When the officials send in memorials, two copies should be made, one for the empress dowager and one for the young emperor.⁸¹⁸

This suggests that regent empresses did have direct contact with officials. Considering the logistics of managing an empire, it makes sense that direct contact be permitted.

As Yang outlines, and this thesis demonstrates, criticism of empresses regent was a contemporary phenomenon. Du Gen is recorded by Yang as the first who openly criticised

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', p. 50.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

Empress Dowager Deng, when he petitioned for her to return power to the emperor in 107 CE.⁸¹⁹ Allegedly, Du Gen survived the sentence of being beaten to death as ordered by Empress Dowager Deng and returned to the court after her death. This story is recorded by Fan Ye who, in his later history of the Han Dynasty, criticised Empress Dowager Deng and the power provided to consort families through such regencies.⁸²⁰ It appears that although Liu Xiang's text was not well placed to influence political circles in times of uncertainty it did have long lasting effects on the perception of consort families in later histories.

Women as Political and Historical Tools

The important political status and value of imperial women meant they were often used by their male peers as a means to an end. This is part of women's use as political and historical tools. Female members of the imperial family were frequently moved like chess pieces by male relatives to suit the imperial agenda, particularly when it came to dynastic marriages. Historians also used imperial women in this way, embellishing and exaggerating their characters to achieve a certain message in their works. It is specifically the way historians use women in their work that, in part, explains the misrepresentation of women.

Historians of Han Dynasty China paid much attention to women in politics. Numerous historians assumed that women's actions were significant and deserved presentation, yet historical discourse about women was sometimes quite negative.⁸²¹ Indeed, Han historians arguably saw women as a necessary part of political power. In fact, Sima Qian wrote a chapter titled *Hereditary Houses of the Families Related to the Emperor by Marriage* which chronicles Han Dynasty empresses and concubines.⁸²² Following this example, Ban Gu also devoted a section to accounts of the families related to the emperor by marriage.⁸²³ Though this reveals that women were considered worthy of historical discussion, it reveals little of the discourse surrounding them. While women were necessarily involved in politics and relevant to any historical record of imperial matters, this did not mean they were lauded in dynastic histories.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., p. 56. *HHS* 87.

⁸²⁰ Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', p. 57.

⁸²¹ Hinsch, 'Portent Experts', p. 97.

⁸²² *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 322.

⁸²³ *HS* 97A–B; Watson, trans., *Selections from Pan Ku*, p. 247 ff.

Sima Qian's history makes use of tropes against women; indeed, he

explicitly and systematically integrated the previous vague connection between women and catastrophe into a highly developed view of history, making this viewpoint a mainstream historical interpretation. Of course, Sima Qian had a sophisticated view of the world, and was not entirely negative in his views of women.⁸²⁴

As Sima Qian was the first historian to write dynastic history, it is not surprising his historiographic decisions are very significant in terms of history written thereafter. The way that he links concubines and empresses to disaster in his *Shiji* had, according to Hinsch, a major impact on the 'development of early gender discourse.'⁸²⁵ This is something historians need to be aware of as they read the pages of the *Shiji*. Not only were women and their behaviours cosmically significant, but women were themselves often viewed as tempters of men and/or corruptors of morals. Sima Qian mentions an incident in which Duke Mu (秦穆公) sends female musicians to corrupt the leaders of the Rong (戎) and Xiongnu (匈奴) tribes.⁸²⁶ Such incidents reveal that women were perceived as able to adversely affect men through their entertainment (and possibly more) and that Han Dynasty men were willing to use them for such a purpose. Here, we return to the familiar cross-cultural trope of women as causation for male behaviour rather than men as responsible for their own behaviour.

As would be expected, such discourse is echoed in Ban Gu's *Hanshu*. Han Dynasty portent studies examined the relationship between natural disasters or events and people's actions. They often associated female behaviour with natural disasters.⁸²⁷ This had the effect of limiting female political power as the dynasty continued.⁸²⁸ Sima Qian and Ban Gu's histories are no doubt affected by this cultural (pseudo-religious) trend. Portent studies as a discipline had a widespread effect and, by the time Ban Gu wrote in the later Eastern Han Dynasty, 'few palace ladies were viewed favourably'.⁸²⁹ In the *Hanshu* Ban Jieyu is,

⁸²⁴ Hinsch, 'Portent Experts', p. 97.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

⁸²⁶ *SJ* 5.192–93. Note that music could be licentious, and the office of music within the imperial palace was abolished by Emperor Ai. *HS* 11.2a, Dubs III, p. 19. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 202.

⁸²⁷ Hinsch, 'Portent Experts', p. 98.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

⁸²⁹ Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, p. 100.

unsurprisingly, one of the few women who received praise.⁸³⁰ Empress Lü's unfavourable image in the Han Dynasty historical tradition had more to do with the political fallout after her death than her life and rule.⁸³¹ Her negative presentation was arguably an historical tool to legitimise the emperors who usurped the throne following her death and murdered her family. Women were easy prey for historians and, since overt criticism of an emperor was generally inadvisable, women close to an emperor were frequently a means of oblique criticism. Female actions reflected on their male family members, including husbands. Empress Lü is examined more closely at page 195.

The conflict between officials on the one hand and consorts and eunuchs on the other permeated the Han Dynasty, and later analysis of it. Unsurprisingly, historians—generally belonging to families who were traditionally officials in the imperial court—rail against consort power. Thus, following an earthquake in 133 CE an official delivered a sharp indictment of the contemporary scene, including how appointments were being made and the ennoblement of the mother of Emperor An.⁸³²

In Han Dynasty China, imperial women proved useful as political tools to help establish or maintain peace with the Xiongnu. Just as women were tools for their male contemporaries, they also became literary tools for later historians. Women were used to diffuse blame or to feature as the cause of political misrule.

Empress Shangguan

Prior to Empress Shangguan's (上官皇后) marriage to Emperor Zhao, her maternal grandfather Huo Guang (霍光), who was already General in Chief, was enfeoffed as a marquis by the emperor.⁸³³ At this time, Huo Guang's son-in-law (and paternal grandfather of Empress Shangguan), Shangguang Jie (上官桀) was General of the Left.⁸³⁴ Empress Shangguan was established as empress in 83 BCE at the age of six.⁸³⁵ Her husband, Emperor

⁸³⁰ This is something highlighted by Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, pp. 86–9. Ban Jieyu is mentioned by Ban Gu for instance in *HS* 97A–B; Watson, trans., *Selections from Pan Ku*, p. 262. Here, she anticipated the troubled court atmosphere (during the time of the Zhao sisters) and wisely requested to retire to serve the Empress Dowager.

⁸³¹ See below 'The Presentation of Empress Lü', p. 213.

⁸³² *HHS* 63.2078. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 308.

⁸³³ *HS* 7.3a; Dubs II, p. 156.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁵ *HS* 7.4a; Dubs II, p. 157. The Emperor Zhao due to his young age was cared for by his elder half-sister, who became the Elder Princess.

Zhao, had only acceded to the throne as the result of a failed coup by the former heir apparent towards the end of his father Emperor Wu's reign. Emperor Zhao was eight years of age when he became emperor in 87 BCE.⁸³⁶ At the time of Emperor Zhao becoming emperor, his mother, former Beautiful Companion Zhao, was already dead, thereby arguably providing more room for others to wield influence, such as Huo Guang and Shangguan Jie.⁸³⁷

Shortly after Empress Shangguan was made empress the Emperor enfeoffed her father, Shangguan An (上官安), who was already the General of the Agile Cavalry, as a marquis.⁸³⁸ Ban Gu reports that it was a plot between the elder princess and Shangguan Jie and Shangguan An that brought down many close to the Emperor Zhao. This was part of a power struggle with Huo Guang and apparently involved killing Huo Guang and setting up an alternate member of the Liu family as emperor.⁸³⁹ For whatever reason, Huo Guang was successful and the three conspirators were all executed, and an imperial edict addressed the incident, declaring it treason.⁸⁴⁰ Indeed, Ban Gu would have it that Huo Guang oversaw the government.⁸⁴¹

Emperor Zhao died in 74 BCE, leaving a very young Empress Dowager Shangguan (who was around fifteen years of age).⁸⁴² Her maternal grandfather Huo Guang used Empress Shangguan's position as empress dowager to wield political power.⁸⁴³ Following the death of Shangguan's husband, she and her maternal grandfather appointed the new emperor, Liu He.⁸⁴⁴ Empress Dowager Shangguan assisted Huo Guang to dethrone the Prince of Changyi (昌邑王) in 74 BCE. He was dismissed by the Empress Dowager due to his disorderly conduct and subsequently replaced with Emperor Xuan.⁸⁴⁵ Note that Huo Guang suggested

⁸³⁶ *HS* 7.1a; Dubs II, p. 151. Indeed, he only received the cap of virility and thus adulthood in 77 BCE when he was 18 years of age. *HS* 7.8b; Dubs II, p. 169.

⁸³⁷ *HS* 7.2a; Dubs II, p. 152.

⁸³⁸ *HS* 7.4b; Dubs II, p. 159.

⁸³⁹ *HS* 7.7a; Dubs II, p. 165.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴¹ *HS* 7.10b; Dubs II, p. 175.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.* Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 76.

⁸⁴³ Dubs II, p. 188. Dubs here suggests, and I would agree, that until his death Huo Guang was the real ruler even during Emperor Xuan's reign.

⁸⁴⁴ *HS* 7.4a; Dubs II, p. 157, *HS* 8.3a; Dubs II, p. 203.

⁸⁴⁵ *HS* 8.3a f.; Dubs II, p. 203. See Dubs II, p. 180 onwards for discussion. Note that Dubs discusses the power of Empress Dowager Shangguan to command and direct the Emperor Liu Ho as his adoptive mother. Liu Ho had ascended the throne aged around 18 or 19 years of age. Nevertheless, the younger Empress Dowager Shangguan was able to approve his removal from the throne. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 78.

Xuan as the new emperor and his granddaughter approved the memorial and gave Xuan the imperial seals and seal cords.⁸⁴⁶ Though it may be inferred her grandfather's role was decisive, this series of events reveal the importance of the position of empress dowager. Nomination of Shangguan as empress dowager gave Huo Guang the necessary authority to issue decrees.⁸⁴⁷ It was only through the empress dowager and her elevated status that her grandfather was able to rule as regent and direct the appointment of Emperor Xuan.⁸⁴⁸ Thus,

[t]he nomination of Chao-ti's [Emperor Zhao's] widow as Empress Dowager created the necessary authority in whose name decrees could be issued and actions taken even to the point of making and unmaking an emperor⁸⁴⁹

Ban Gu advises that the family, namely Huo Guang's second wife, was later responsible for the death of Emperor Xuan's wife, Empress Xu Pingjun (許平君).⁸⁵⁰ Their own family member, Empress Huo, was enthroned as a result.⁸⁵¹ As Dubs explains, no real punitive action was later taken against the Huo clan because of their military importance; in other words, they controlled the army.⁸⁵² Empress Dowager Shangguan survived and later made extensive grants of money and goods to the Han hierarchy:

The Empress Dowager [Shangguan] made grants of silk to the Lieutenant Chancellor [Ping Chi], the generals, the full marquises, and [officials ranking at] fully two thousand piculs, one hundred bolts to each; and to the grantees, eighty bolts each.⁸⁵³

This is evidence of imperial women's wealth and how that wealth might be used to re-establish ties of loyalty. Despite her family's actions and notoriety, Ban Gu implies the Empress Dowager was not involved in the detailed machinations of the Huo clan. Indeed, during the reign of Emperor Yuan, Empress Dowager Shangguan was elevated (as was the

⁸⁴⁶ *HS* 8.3b; Dubs II, pp. 204 and 205.

⁸⁴⁷ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 80.

⁸⁴⁸ M. Loewe 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', pp. 188–9.

⁸⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁸⁵⁰ Empress Xu was the highest-level concubine of Emperor Xuan and he elevated her to Empress in 74BC, see *HS* 8.3b; Dubs II, p. 205. *HS* 8.6b; Dubs II, p. 212. *HS* 8.10b; Dubs II, p. 226. Empress Huo was eventually dismissed in 66 BCE (see *HS* 8.10b; Dubs II, p. 226). Note that Loewe comments 'the nomination of a particular consort as Hou [empress] was necessary to secure the succession legitimately'. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict on Han China*, p. 129.

⁸⁵¹ *HS* 8.6b; Dubs II, p. 213; Empress Huo's enthronement. *HS* 8.10b; Dubs II, p. 226; the plot resulting in former Empress Xu's death was discovered and Empress Huo was dismissed.

⁸⁵² Dubs II, p. 186.

⁸⁵³ *HS* 8.19a; Dubs I, p. 247. Empress Dowager Xu survived until 37 BCE.

custom) to the title of Grand Empress Dowager.⁸⁵⁴ Her life story demonstrates that imperial women were often the tools of politically ambitious family members. It also reveals that empresses dowager were extremely powerful and had the potential to provide ultimate power to individuals or a family group. Once a woman had become an empress dowager, with no more senior woman above her, her path and survival were assured.⁸⁵⁵

Imperial Transfer

In the Han Dynasty's 'western' counterpart, imperial Rome, daughters of the emperor and other female relatives, were used in marriage to bring male outsiders into the imperial family and anoint them as heirs. This contrasts with Han Dynasty practice, and this difference is largely attributable to the abundance of children of the Han emperor because of his multiple female partners. As has been seen, nieces of the emperor could be married to a son of the emperor to ensure the family's ongoing influence and power, but this was more to help the bride than the groom. A man of non-imperial blood could not be married to an imperial woman and thus anointed emperor, or any male issue from the marriage made emperor, as was possible in Rome.

Nevertheless, the role of consorts in imperial succession remained important. Imperial succession was problematic, often viewed as subject to the favouritism, power and privilege of an imperial consort or her family.⁸⁵⁶ Certainly, women, and particularly empresses dowager, could play a significant role in imperial succession, mainly because many Han Dynasty emperors were not particularly long-lived.⁸⁵⁷ This may have dated back to Shang Dynasty practice, where an empress's role in succession was paramount.⁸⁵⁸ Towards the end of the Western Han Dynasty, however, the line of blood succession faltered. This coincided with the life and influence of Empress Wang. Upon his accession, Emperor Yuan enthroned Wang Zhengjun (王政君), a woman of the Wang clan, as his empress. In 47 BCE, Emperor Yuan appointed the son of Empress Wang as the heir apparent (the future Emperor Cheng).

⁸⁵⁴ *HS* 9.2a; Dubs II, p. 302. In contrast to male members of Huo Guang's family, his granddaughter and daughter survived. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 113.

⁸⁵⁵ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 113.

⁸⁵⁶ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 104. Here the *Cambridge History of China* continues to promulgate the rhetoric of illegitimate consort power.

⁸⁵⁷ Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 45, has identified that the average age of the thirteen Eastern Han Dynasty emperors was 30 years.

⁸⁵⁸ Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, p. 176.

Unsurprisingly, the brothers of the Empress Wang were made marquises and occupied high positions in the government of Emperor Yuan.

Ban Gu tells us that Emperor Yuan was reconsidering his selection of heir apparent and was considering appointing his second son born of Beautiful Companion Fu (傅昭儀). No change was made, no doubt due to some significant effort on the part of the Wang clan who, via the future Emperor Cheng, were able to wield great control. As a result, when Emperor Yuan died, Emperor Cheng succeeded him. At the time of Emperor Cheng's accession or shortly thereafter, his eldest maternal uncle was Palace Attendant and Commandant of the Palace Guard and another maternal uncle was made Commander in Chief, General in Chief and Intendant of Affairs of the Masters of Writing. One of the Wang men later placed in positions of power was Wang Mang.⁸⁵⁹

Any male issue of Emperor Cheng appointed by him as heir apparent could inherit the Imperial throne. By way of contrast, in contemporary Rome, only children of a lawful wife would be considered legitimate and thus possible heirs. Being born out of wedlock would render a child politically useless.⁸⁶⁰ Not so in Han Dynasty China, where many children from many different wives were available and even children of a slave girl, if fathered by the emperor, could be considered. For Han Dynasty China, biological legitimacy stemmed only from the father or grandfather, not from the mother. The Emperor Cheng produced no heirs and, as such, a grandson of the previous Emperor Yuan succeeded to the throne.

Emperor Cheng had unusually ensured he had no heirs, something discussed below in the subchapter on the Zhao sisters. This was of grave concern for the imperial court as neither the Empress Xu nor the Empress Zhao bore surviving children to Emperor Cheng, nor did his various consorts.⁸⁶¹ Further, the dynastic history informs us Emperor Cheng had given himself up to wine and women, against all the Confucian strictures in Han Dynasty

⁸⁵⁹ Wang Mang was a chief assistant and had been for around one year when the Emperor Cheng died; *HS* 99A.2b; Dubs III, p. 130. The power of the Wang clan was allegedly marked by bad omens. The *Hanshu* mentions that around 30 BCE a nine-year-old girl was able to enter the imperial palace undetected. This was interpreted as a sign that the power of Yin was at its height. Further, it was said that by exploiting the favours granted to a woman, the lower orders would be taking up residence in the palace. The incident is associated with the power of the Wang clan. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 189.

⁸⁶⁰ This is something seen in the Roman world with the alleged child of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra VII of Egypt, Caesarion. He was illegitimate and thus unable to inherit any financial or political benefit from his father.

⁸⁶¹ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 336 for discussion of the concern at imperial court.

thought.⁸⁶² Thus, someone other than a son of the Emperor Cheng needed to be selected. In the absence of any heirs, Emperor Cheng's mother, Empress Dowager Wang, thus held some authority and, with Emperor Cheng's maternal uncles from the Wang clan in positions of power, the Wang clan held sway.⁸⁶³

As demonstrated by Empress Dowager Wang's role following the death of Emperor Cheng, imperial women held great influence over who succeeded in the event of a lack of heirs. Following Emperor Cheng's death, the Empress Dowager Wang (later titled Grand Empress Dowager) issued an imperial edict that suburban sacrifices be re-established in the capital city, Changan.⁸⁶⁴ It may be seen that consorts wielded power, although the decisions may have ultimately been made by male relatives. It is often difficult to step behind the official decisions of imperial women to determine this. However, according to Ban Gu, Empress Dowager Wang also ordered her own relative, Wang Mang, to step aside from his office to leave his position vacant for maternal relatives of the new Emperor Ai.⁸⁶⁵ As members of a family, imperial women owed loyalty to the furtherance of that family's interests. There is no reason to suggest Empress Dowager Wang was merely a puppet. Decisions could be made by imperial women having regard to the long-term interests of her natal family. This may, of course, have been a ruse to ensure the new young emperor would retain Wang Mang, who had served his uncle Emperor Cheng. If so, the scheme succeeded, as Emperor Ai refused to accept Wang Mang stepping down and the Grand Empress Dowager Wang issued another imperial edict ordering Wang Mang to attend to government business.⁸⁶⁶ Certainly, it would make sense for Wang Mang and Grand Empress Dowager Wang to work in concert with each other. Ban Gu records Wang Mang as being affronted by an attempt to place Emperor Ai's mother, a concubine, on a similar level to Grand Empress Dowager Wang:

At a later date, there was a banquet in Wei-yang [Weiyang] Palace. The Prefect for the Flunkies spread the canopy and seat for the Queen Dowager Fu at the side of the

⁸⁶² *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418. The trope of the sexual behaviour of the emperor and his consorts causing the dynasty or kingdom to fall into disarray continued long after the Han Dynasty; consider the instance of Yang Guifei (楊貴妃 [杨贵妃]) and Emperor Ming (明皇). Mann, 'Presidential Address', p. 849.

⁸⁶³ Emperor Cheng's maternal uncle Wang Ch'ung became a marquis. His uncles Wang Tan and Wang Shang became Kuan-nei marquises. *HS* 10.3a Dubs II, p. 377. He later made all five maternal uncles full marquises, *HS* 10.5b; Dubs II, p. 275 in 25 BCE.

⁸⁶⁴ *HS* 10.16a; Dubs II, p. 417. Earlier, in 14 BCE, the Empress Dowager issued an edict ordering the restoration of several forms of worship. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in the Han Dynasty*, p.178.

⁸⁶⁵ *HS* 99A.2b; Dubs III, p. 130.

⁸⁶⁶ *HS* 99A.2b; Dubs III, p. 131.

seat for the Grand Empress Dowager Wang. Wang Mang investigated and reproached the Prefect of the Flunkies, saying, 'The Queen Dowager of Ting-t'ao [Dingtao] is a concubine from a tributary kingdom. How could she be permitted to be honoured equally with the most honourable? Take it away and put the seat Queen Dowager of Ting-t'ao [Dingtao] in a different place'.⁸⁶⁷

後日，未央宮置酒，內者令為傅太后張幄，坐於太皇太后坐旁。莽案行，責內者令曰：「定陶太后藩妾，何以得與至尊並！徹去，更設坐。」

This would tend to suggest that Wang Mang was sensitive to the position of his aunt, Grand Empress Dowager Wang, and felt the need for the distinction between her honourable position and the relatively lowly position of the Emperor Ai's own mother. There were further tensions between the Wang and Fu families during Emperor Ai's reign. The Grand Empress Dowager Fu was Emperor Ai's grandmother and had raised him; upon his accession, there were issues regarding her residence and proximity to the young emperor.⁸⁶⁸ If Ban Gu's record is accurate, it demonstrates, that immediately following the death of the Emperor, his mother stepped forward. Ban Gu further states that from the reign of Emperor Cheng onwards, the Wang clan grasped power over the state and the subsequent Emperors Ai and Ping had conveniently short lives before the reign of Wang Mang.⁸⁶⁹ Certainly Ban Gu had access to the imperial records and, thus, his recording of imperial edicts given by Grand Empress Dowager Wang should be correct, even if the way in which he depicted the sequence of events may be for effect.

Emperor Ai was a grandson of Emperor Yuan (thus, Grand Empress Dowager Wang was his grandmother by marriage), a nephew of Emperor Cheng and no doubt selected by Empress Dowager Wang and her family. Ban Gu states Emperor Cheng selected Emperor Ai as his heir apparent in 8 BCE, shortly prior to his death.⁸⁷⁰ While possible, it appears more likely Emperor Ai was selected by the Wang clan. Shortly after his accession, his grandmother Grand Empress Dowager Wang issued an imperial edict honouring the King of Dingtao (定陶) who had replaced Emperor Ai in that title.⁸⁷¹ Grand Empress Dowager Wang

⁸⁶⁷ *HS* 99A.3a; Dubs III, p. 132.

⁸⁶⁸ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 274. The Grand Dowager Empress Fu lived in lodgings provided for periodic use of kings paying homage to the emperor, and thus in physical proximity. Further, the fact she had raised him meant she had real influence over the young man.

⁸⁶⁹ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

⁸⁷⁰ *HS* 11.1a,b; Dubs III, p. 16

⁸⁷¹ *HS* 11.2a; Dubs III, p. 18.

issued imperial edicts during the reign of her son and continued this into that of her grandson, who was aged twenty and had reached majority.⁸⁷² Further, in 6 BCE Grand Empress Dowager Wang issued an imperial edict that the cultivated fields which had not been used for Wang family tombs should be distributed to the poor people.⁸⁷³

Emperor Ai died, after a short reign of just seven years, on or around 15 August 1 BCE.⁸⁷⁴ Immediately the Wang clan mobilised. During his short reign, Emperor Ai had honoured his maternal relatives Ting and Fu over the Wang clan. Loewe states this was an attempt to replace the power held by the Wang clan.⁸⁷⁵ Just prior to his death, Emperor Ai had placed three men into the highest positions in government, none of whom was a member of the Wang clan.⁸⁷⁶ Nevertheless, upon the death of Emperor Ai Grand Empress Dowager Wang acted decisively via four separate but related actions.⁸⁷⁷ Firstly, she rode to the Weiyang palace and physically secured the imperial seals of the late emperor.⁸⁷⁸ Secondly, an imperial edict was issued removing one of the three most senior men appointed by Emperor Ai.⁸⁷⁹ Thirdly, she made her nephew Wang Mang Commander in Chief and Intendant of the Affairs of the Masters of Writing.⁸⁸⁰ Fourthly, she invited the King of Zhongshan (中山), a grandson of Emperor Yuan, to come to the capital and become emperor. This Emperor Ping was enthroned. The seniority of Grand Empress Dowager Wang, her association with Emperor Yuan and Emperor Cheng, her familial power base and the fact that she had previously issued imperial edicts during the reigns of Emperors Cheng and Ai placed her in a position to act decisively now to ensure stability. Due to the tender age of Emperor Ping, who was around

⁸⁷² Ban Gu tells us Emperor Ai underwent the capping ceremony that marked the onset of adulthood in his seventeenth year in 9 BCE (*HS* 11.1a; Dubs III, p. 16). Indeed, as can be seen this trend continued into the reign of Emperor Ping, during which time the Grand Empress Dowager Wang issued many imperial edicts and reigned for the emperor: *HS* 12.9a; Dubs III, p. 82.

⁸⁷³ *HS* 11.4a; Dubs III, p. 26.

⁸⁷⁴ *HS* 11.8b; Dubs III, p. 38.

⁸⁷⁵ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 256.

⁸⁷⁶ *HS* 11.8a; Dubs III, pp. 37 and 38. Further, he had attempted to make his male lover Dong Xian his heir but failed.

⁸⁷⁷ Loewe outlines that Emperor Ai's love for Dong Xian had caused the emperor to rely less on the Ting and Fu clans, enabling the Wang to dominate shortly after his death. It can be said that the attempt by Emperor Ai to place Dong Xian as his successor, an illegitimate and likely unacceptable succession plan enabled the Wang clan to take control. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 256.

⁸⁷⁸ *HS* 99A.4a; Dubs III, p. 136.

⁸⁷⁹ *HS* 12.1a; Dubs III, p. 61.

⁸⁸⁰ *HS* 12.1b; Dubs III, p. 62. Note that the Memorial of Wang Mang Ban Gu appears to place this as the second action undertaken by the Grand Empress Dowager Wang *HS* 99A.4a; Dubs III, p. 136. The order is less significant than the actions themselves however.

nine years old, Grand Empress Dowager Wang attended court, likely in his place.⁸⁸¹ Further, Ban Gu states that Wang Mang, as Commander in Chief, took charge of the government.⁸⁸² The Wang clan also removed the maternal relatives Emperor Ai had elevated, the Empress Fu of Emperor Ai and former Empress Zhao of Emperor Cheng, and forced them to retire.⁸⁸³ This left the Grand Empress Dowager Wang alone as a mother or grandmother to the young Emperor Ping; further, it left no alternative platform from which imperial power could flow. The removal of other empresses dowager is significant. It would not have been undertaken if it were not necessary. The fact it was necessary demonstrates, as do Grand Empress Dowager Wang's actions, that imperial power could be and was vested in women.

Grand Empress Dowager Wang provided the means of imperial transfer for three emperors, her son and two grandsons of her late husband Emperor Yuan. The image of Grand Empress Dowager Wang provided by Ban Gu is not, however, a negative one. He reports various charitable donations she makes from her familial and personal property.⁸⁸⁴ Yet Grand Empress Dowager Wang's role in imperial transition was not completed. In 3 CE, while ruling in the place of Emperor Ping, who still lacked majority, she issued an imperial edict that the Emperor Ping propose marriage to the daughter of Wang Mang (also her great-niece).⁸⁸⁵ Later that year, Wang Mang's daughter was made Empress Wang.⁸⁸⁶ In a matter of less than two years, Emperor Ping died.⁸⁸⁷ Following the death of Emperor Ping, it was the Grand Empress Dowager, now in her seventies, who issued an imperial edict regarding the emperor.⁸⁸⁸ The longevity of the Grand Empress Dowager's power had served the Wang clan very well. This resulted from her marriage to Emperor Yuan, being his empress and being the mother of Emperor Cheng.

Even though many empresses in the Han Dynasty, unlike Grand Empress Dowager Wang, remained childless, they could still influence the choice of heir apparent and create familial ties with that heir apparent. Empress Ma (馬皇后) of Emperor Meng produced no children

⁸⁸¹ *HS* 12.1b; Dubs III, p. 62; *HS* 99A.4a; Dubs III, p. 137.

⁸⁸² *HS* 12.1b; Dubs III, p. 62.

⁸⁸³ *HS* 12.1b; Dubs III, p. 62; *HS* 99A.4a; Dubs III, p. 137.

⁸⁸⁴ For instance, in 1 CE Grand Empress Dowager Wang disposed of 10 prefectures of her private estate from which she received income and donated them to assist the poor; *HS* 12.4b; Dubs III, p. 70.

⁸⁸⁵ *HS* 12.6b; Dubs III, p. 75.

⁸⁸⁶ *HS* 12.7b; Dubs III, p. 69.

⁸⁸⁷ *HS* 12.10a; Dubs III, p. 85.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

with her husband. Emperor Meng had nine sons born to him by ladies of the imperial harem. Yet it was the fifth, the son of the Honourable Lady Jia (賈貴人), that he appointed as heir apparent. Lady Jia was a first cousin of Empress Ma, and Bielenstein posits that an arrangement between the two women suited the clan; as such, the mother of the heir apparent was not enthroned.⁸⁸⁹ Empress Ma apparently took charge of the heir apparent's upbringing.⁸⁹⁰ Consort kin here played a pivotal role in influencing the nomination of the heir apparent. Further, Empress Ma controlled the heir apparent's imperial harem and thus had influence over the future of the imperial succession. The Dou sisters entered the imperial harem of the heir apparent and one of them later become Empress Dou, instead of the Song sisters nominated by Empress Ma.⁸⁹¹ The Song sisters were then accused of witchcraft and forced to commit suicide.⁸⁹²

Once enthroned, Empress Dou appears to have made an alliance with the Liang clan and admitted entrance of two Liang ladies into the imperial harem of the Emperor Zhang. The elder of the two gave birth to a son who later became heir apparent—Bielenstein alleges at the instigation of Empress Dou.⁸⁹³ Empress Dou adopted the heir apparent and, through elimination of his blood relations, ensured he was fully inculcated into her family clan.

As has been seen, women could influence and control imperial transfer through their role as empress dowager. Thus, Emperor Cheng's mother, Empress Dowager Wang (later Grand Empress Dowager Wang), survived her son and assisted in the accession of Emperor Yuan. Ban Gu was keenly aware of the influence the Wang family were exerting and commented:

From Jianshi onwards, the Wang clan first grasped the power of the state. Emperors Ai and Ping had only short lives, and Wang Mang thereupon usurped the throne. In fact his usurpation of the imperial power, thereby enabling him to grant severity or favour, came about [very] gradually.⁸⁹⁴

建始以來，王氏始執國命，哀、平短祚，莽遂篡位，蓋其威福所由來者漸矣！

⁸⁸⁹ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 280. *HHS* 2.106; *HHS* 3.129; *HHS* 10A.409.

⁸⁹⁰ *HHS* 2.106; *HHS* 3.129 and *HHS* 10A.409.

⁸⁹¹ *HHS* 3.136–7; *HHS* 10A.411 ff.; *HHS* 5.1799 ff.

⁸⁹² Yang, 'Ban Zhao and Gender Issues', p. 38.

⁸⁹³ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 281. *HHS* 4.165; *HHS* 10A.412. *Jianshi* refers to the first reign period of Emperor Cheng, being from 32 to 28 BCE.

⁸⁹⁴ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

Women as Foreign Policy Tools

Imperial daughters in Han China were sometimes used as tools to create or cement peaceful foreign policy arrangements. Tamara Chin has discussed Sima Qian's approach to the Xiongnu and Han–Xiongnu marriage diplomacy.⁸⁹⁵ The Xiongnu were a threat to the Han Dynasty and its sovereignty. In 177 BCE, a large-scale invasion occurred, and in 166 BCE enemy horsemen came within 120 kilometres of the administrative capital and imperial city of Chang'an.⁸⁹⁶ The Han imperial court used marriage diplomacy, or *heqin* (和亲), to attempt to create peace through the formation of familial relationships. The Xiongnu culture did not necessarily replicate the Han emphasis on patriarchy and authority based on seniority. Sima Qian, in his discussion of the Xiongnu, outlines the customs of the group, stating that when fathers die the sons marry the stepmothers and that when brothers die the brothers left behind take their brothers wives and marry them.⁸⁹⁷ This indeed demonstrates cultural practices greatly divergent from those of the Han. Marriage of Han Dynasty imperial women to Xiongnu was a sacrifice, as it meant divorce from the imperial court and assimilation into a different culture and way of life.⁸⁹⁸

Sima Qian devotes a chapter of his history to the exploration of the Xiongnu and Chinese encounters.⁸⁹⁹ Sima Qian recounts that during the reign of King Zhao of the Qin state, the ruler of the Yiqu (義渠) barbarians had illicit relations with King Zhao's mother.⁹⁰⁰ King Zhao's mother, Queen Dowager Xuan, had two sons by the Yiqu leader. It is unclear whether this casts any doubt as to the parentage of King Zhao, but it likely did not. It appears the Queen Dowager then deceived and murdered the Yiqu leader and raised an army to ravage Yiqu lands.⁹⁰¹ This example offers a contrast to the traditional marriage alliance model.

⁸⁹⁵ Tamara T. Chin, 'De-familiarizing the Foreigner: Sima Qian's Ethnography and Han–Xiongnu Marriage Diplomacy', *HJAS* 70.2 (2010).

⁸⁹⁶ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 152.

⁸⁹⁷ *SJ* 110; Watson II, p. 130. For further discussion of this passage see Chin, 'De-Familiarizing the Foreigner', p. 325. Later, Sima Qian later provides some defence of these customs. Through the voice of a Han Dynasty eunuch accompanying a princess sent to be consort to the Xiongnu leader, we are told the practice of marriage to stepmothers and brothers' wives is to prevent the clan from dying out. *SJ* 110; Watson II, p. 144.

⁸⁹⁸ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 23. Note that the poetry of Cai Yan demonstrates the significant personal toll of a marriage across communities and cultures. Chang & Saussy, *Women Writers*, p. 22.

⁸⁹⁹ *SJ* 110; Watson II, p. 129 ff.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3.

Apparently, women were used as bargaining chips in diplomacy between different barbarian states. Sima Qian gives the example of one barbarian group requesting a consort from other state and the leader's favourite consort being sent.⁹⁰²

In his discussion of Emperor Gao's reign, Sima Qian notes discussions as to whether the Emperor should send his daughter to marry the Xiongnu leader.⁹⁰³ Liu Jing (劉敬), a minister to the emperor, promoted the plan as a means to place the future Xiongnu leader (the son of the Han princess) in the Han emperor's power.⁹⁰⁴ Sima Qian includes the following speech from Liu Jing:

When he dies your grandson will become shanyu. And who indeed had heard of a grandson who has dared to defy the property owned by his grandfather? Without a battle our army will be able to use this gradual method to subject them.⁹⁰⁵

This explicitly applies Han cultural practices and theory to Xiongnu society. In the end, however, Sima Qian suggests that Emperor Gaozu pretended a woman was his daughter and married her to a Xiongnu leader to establish peaceful relations with that group.⁹⁰⁶ It was Empress Lü who proved the more persuasive; responding to Liu Jing's suggestion, she appealed to the mother-daughter kinship bond.⁹⁰⁷ Empress Lü stated she could not bear to lose one of her two children.⁹⁰⁸ Such a statement makes it clear that sending imperial women to the Xiongnu was considered a kind of death—living outside China might certainly be viewed as a severe consequence of such marriages.

The authenticity of this speech is questioned by Markley, on the basis that the Princess Yuan (元公主) (the real daughter of Emperor Gaozu and Empress Lü) was already married at the time to the Prince of Zhao, something reiterated by Chin.⁹⁰⁹ Princess Yuan no longer lived in the Imperial Palace, and Empress Lü's entreaties that her daughter not be cast off to the Xiongnu seem 'less plausible' to Markley.⁹¹⁰ The reference here is surely not to the distance

⁹⁰² Ibid., p. 135.

⁹⁰³ *SJ* 99.2719.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., Chin, trans., 'De-Familiarizing the Foreigner', pp. 340–1.

⁹⁰⁶ *SJ* 99; Watson I, p. 239.

⁹⁰⁷ *SJ* 99; Watson I, p. 239. *SJ* 99.2719, Chin, trans., 'De-Familiarizing the Foreigner', p. 341.

⁹⁰⁸ *SJ* 99; Watson I, p. 239.

⁹⁰⁹ *SJ* 89; Watson I, p. 142. Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 29. Chin, 'De-Familiarizing the Foreigner', p. 342.

⁹¹⁰ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 30.

between the mother and daughter, however, but to the different and unpredictable life the daughter might have in the Xiongnu community. Chin proposes that Sima Qian uses the discussion of a possible marriage alliance by Emperor Gaozu as an example where the Emperor failed by listening to his wife instead of his wise minister Liu Jing.⁹¹¹ Whatever the purpose of Sima Qian's inclusion of this incident, it reveals that marrying the daughter of the emperor to the Xiongnu leader was certainly an available foreign policy option. In another chapter of the *Shiji*, Sima Qian merely says a princess of the imperial family was sent.⁹¹² This leaves it open for several women to have been sent, other than Princess Yuan. Marriage offers were not the only policy approach, however. Emperor Gaozu also sent an envoy in secret to the consort of the Xiongnu leader Maodun/Modu (冒頓) and she, in turn, spoke favourably of a truce to her husband.⁹¹³

Women of the imperial court who were not of imperial blood were often sent to the Xiongnu or similar groups on China's border regions to maintain peace. In Emperor Wen's reign, he sent a princess of the imperial family to be consort to the new Xiongnu leader.⁹¹⁴ Ban Gu states that sometime likely in the third year of Emperor Hu's reign (192 BCE), a girl of the imperial house was made a princess and given in marriage to the *shanyu* (单于) or leader of the Xiongnu.⁹¹⁵ In or around 104 BCE, an alliance was made with the Wusun (烏孫) via the marriage of Princess Xijun (細君公主) to the Wusun leader.⁹¹⁶ In 33 BCE, the Han government was having trouble with a particular Xiongnu *shanyu*. When the *shanyu* visited the Han imperial court, he was presented with five ladies from the imperial harem.

[To restore order and peace, let] the [Lady] Awaiting an Imperial Edict in the Lateral Courts, Wang Ch'iang, be granted to the Shan-yü to be his Yeh-chih'⁹¹⁷

⁹¹¹ Chin, 'De-Familiarizing the Foreigner', p. 344.

⁹¹² *SJ* 110; Watson II, p. 139.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹¹⁵ *HS* 2.4b; Dubs I, p. 181.

⁹¹⁶ *HS* 96B.3b. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, pp. 23 and 216. Note the Xiongnu subsequently sent one of their princesses to the Wusun leader. Loewe describes the marriages as 'diplomatic by nature and commercial by motive' and as accompanied by 'military or administrative measures in which the Han Government took the initiative to expand its influence in central Asia.' The matrimonial ties meant the Han Dynasty was 'intimately involved in the affairs of Wu-sun [Wusun]'. Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 248.

⁹¹⁷ *HS* 9.13a; Dubs II, p. 335. The quotation uses the Wade-Giles style.

This woman, also known as Wang Zhaojun(王昭君), became a favourite of the *shanyu*, giving birth to two sons. When the *shanyu* died, Wang Zhaojun followed Xiongnu levirate custom and married the next *shanyu*.

Clearly such marriages were aimed at maintaining peace and good relations, in addition to being Han attempts to bring the Xiongnu into their fold and have them conform to the Han hierarchy. Women of the imperial court could thus be vital tools of politics, a means of ensuring peaceful border relations. Chin remarks, however, recalling Han Feizi (韓非子) that an alliance based on marriage could prove dangerous and untrustworthy, as a wife could be loved or estranged by her husband.⁹¹⁸

Of more notoriety, perhaps is the incident in which the Xiongnu leader proposes a marriage alliance with Empress Lü herself following the death of the Emperor Gaozu.⁹¹⁹ This is an ironic adoption of the Han policy of *heqin* by its intended object. Chin suggests that the fact that the Xiongnu leader asks for ‘what he lacks’ may be a reference to the legitimate Han princess he lacks due to Empress Lü’s influence on her husband and the resulting supply of a pretender princess to marry the Xiongnu leader.

In 72 BCE, the Xiongnu invaded the Han Dynasty borders several times.⁹²⁰ The Xiongnu had also attacked the western kingdom of Wusun (烏孫). Fortunately, the leader of the Wusun kingdom had previously sought and obtained a Han Dynasty princess in marriage.⁹²¹ The marriage was a clever strategy for both the Wusun and the Han Dynasty, who formed an alliance against the Xiongnu. Marriages could work in many ways to elicit alliances, and certainly the Han Dynasty appears to have been ill-equipped to conquer Xiongnu lands, preferring a diplomatic approach with bribes of silks and women.⁹²²

⁹¹⁸ Chin, ‘De-Familiarizing the Foreigner’, p. 343.

⁹¹⁹ *HS* 94.3755.

⁹²⁰ *HS* 8.6a; Dubs II, p. 211.

⁹²¹ *Ibid.* See also *SJ* 110; Watson II, p. 129 ff. *HS* 94A.20a.

⁹²² Indeed, towards the end of the Han Dynasty when civil war raged in the north the Xiongnu took a woman, Cai Yan (蔡琰), who lived among them for 12 years, marrying and bearing children. Frankel, ‘Cai Yan and the Poems Attributed to her’, pp. 133–4.

Chapter Ten. Women Without Virtue, Politics in the Imperial Harem

As is demonstrated throughout Liu Xiang's text, sometimes his characters stepped outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour. This is also true of the conduct of women within the Han Dynasty. Conflict often arose within the imperial harem when the roles of empress and mother of the heir apparent failed to coincide in one woman, a situation that frequently led to intrigue and murder and factional strife in the outer bureaucracy. The reason for such conflict is not, as historians would frequently have us believe, petty jealousy but, rather, that the fight for power was a difficult and yet potentially rewarding venture. The imperial harem was at times quite large and consisted of many different classes or ranks of women. Admission was not automatic but apparently subject to a prospective entrant meeting criteria as to beauty, complexion, hair, carriage, elegance, manners and respectability.⁹²³ There were multiple ranks; three ranks of harmonious ladies, nine ranks of spouses, twenty seven ranks of beauties and eighty one of attendants.⁹²⁴ It is typical that an emperor who found censure in a dynastic history would be labelled as licentious.⁹²⁵ As Bielenstein highlights, some emperors may have engaged in drinking and sex with women in the harem, but that imperial succession was manipulated was due to power struggles and not to any issue of moral or physical enfeeblement in the imperial line.⁹²⁶ It appears that the conduct of imperial women, particularly the Zhao sisters may have provided the necessary indignation and ammunition to Liu Xiang.

It is important to remember that an empress would have been a member of the imperial harem, chosen from its ranks and elevated to empress.⁹²⁷ As Bielenstein notes, personal affection was not the issue when it came to appointment as empress, as demonstrated by the fact that eight of the last eleven empresses were childless.⁹²⁸ Rather, the power of a potential empress's family and the need an emperor may have for their support could be decisive.

⁹²³ *HHS* 10A.400.

⁹²⁴ *HS* 99C.20; Dubs III, p. 438.

⁹²⁵ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 259.

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*

The imperial harem was an avenue to power for women, but also for their families. Empress Wang Zhengjun was elevated to the role of empress from relative obscurity following the birth of her son and his nomination as heir apparent.⁹²⁹ Her entrance into the imperial harem first of Emperor Xuan, and then of his heir apparent, the future Emperor Yuan, resulted in her becoming empress and later empress dowager when her son became Emperor Cheng.⁹³⁰ A series of uncles to the emperor then took on the role of regent, culminating in Wang Mang.⁹³¹ Following the death of Emperor Cheng, Emperor Ai took the throne and the Wang family, including Wang Mang, suffered a retreat from political power.⁹³² When Emperor Ai died without nominating an heir, with his mother and grandmother also being deceased, there was a constitutional crisis which Grand Empress Dowager Wang was able to resolve.⁹³³ If Grand Empress Dowager Wang had not joined the imperial harem, she would never have been in the position she was in 2 BCE to enthrone Emperor Ping as the last surviving heir of the Liu line. Nor would she have been able to appoint Wang Mang as acting emperor and Liu Ying as heir apparent.⁹³⁴ Following the demise of Wang Mang, Emperor Guangwu removed the three senior Wang dignitaries in favour of the consort families.⁹³⁵

The choice of consort was a hotly contested one, and prominent consort families posed a potential danger to each other in competing for control of or influence over the emperor. In the late Han Dynasty, Emperor Ling appears to have deliberately chosen consorts from distinguished but less prominent families to prevent confrontation between consort families and the eunuchs.⁹³⁶ Indeed, Empress He (何皇后) was descended from a line of butchers.⁹³⁷

Much of the negative representation of women is due to women apparently stepping outside the 'appropriate' boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and thus acting in an illegitimate way. The implicit assumption that women

close to power must be exerting undue and inappropriate influence arises from a view that political woman is a paradox. Her desire for such power is unnatural, her means

⁹²⁹ Dubs II p. 279.

⁹³⁰ *HS* 9.2a; Dubs II, p. 302.

⁹³¹ *HS* 10.2a; Dubs II, p. 375.

⁹³² *HS* 11.2a; Dubs III, p. 19. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 227.

⁹³³ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 227.

⁹³⁴ *HS* 99A.30a; Dubs III, p. 235. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 229.

⁹³⁵ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 292.

⁹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁹³⁷ *HHS* 8.341; *HHS* 10B.448 ff.

dubious...This becomes clear in the accusations that Chinese concubines sap the powers of male political figures with their distracting sexuality as well as their improper political demands.⁹³⁸

The Zhao Sisters

Zhao Feiyan (趙飛燕) was enthroned as Empress Zhao by Emperor Cheng in 16 BCE following the dismissal of Empress Xu.⁹³⁹ Empress Zhao's sister, Beautiful Companion Zhao or Zhao Hede (趙合德), was a high-ranking concubine. The sisters had risen from relative obscurity as members of a poor family, although they were daughters of the Marquis of Chengyang (成陽侯).⁹⁴⁰ There was initial paternal reluctance to raise the infant Zhao Feiyan, including leaving her untended for three days despite which she did not die. We can probably dismiss this as a convenient embellishment for Liu Xiang's purpose, giving Zhao Feiyan some magical status. Zhao Feiyan was apparently a palace maid and dancer in the palace of the ruler of Heyang (郃陽).⁹⁴¹ Emperor Cheng saw her during a visit to Heyang and thus she entered the imperial harem with her younger sister, Zhao Hede.

Ban Gu's record of Emperor Cheng's reign reports that in early 15 BCE, shortly after Zhao was established as empress in July 16 BCE, there were ill portents, namely stars falling like rain and an eclipse combined with poor harvests.⁹⁴² There were further astrological and natural phenomena throughout Emperor Cheng's reign, such as an eclipse of the sun in 14 BCE,⁹⁴³ weather disturbances,⁹⁴⁴ earthquakes and fire,⁹⁴⁵ rebellions and violence.⁹⁴⁶ It

⁹³⁸ Dixon, 'Domineering Dowagers and Scheming Concubines', p. 212.

⁹³⁹ *HS* 10.11a; Dubs II, p. 401. Empress Xu had ruled as empress from 31 BCE until January 17 BCE, some 14 years. Yet in 19 BCE, when Empress Xu was dismissed, no new empress was appointed immediately. Empress Zhao was not appointed as such until July of 16 BCE. Reduced to the status of Lady Xu, the former empress was sent poison by the Commandant of Justice (on the emperor's orders) and died in 7 BCE. *HS* 10.15b; Dubs II, p. 416.

⁹⁴⁰ *LNZ* 9.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 236. Note their father was enfeoffed as marquis in June or July 16 BCE, just before Empress Zhao was established, meaning the Zhao sisters' family may have required an elevation in status *HS* 10.11a; Dubs II, p. 401.

⁹⁴¹ *LNZ* 9.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 236. Dubs II, p. 367.

⁹⁴² *HS* 10.11b; Dubs II, p. 403.

⁹⁴³ *HS* 10.12b; Dubs II, p. 405.

⁹⁴⁴ *HS* 10.13b; Dubs II, p. 410. Clouds had disappeared, thunder, light shining everywhere descending to the earth.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 408. Fires within the palace and an earthquake in the capital.

⁹⁴⁶ *HS* 10.12b; Dubs II, p. 406. A rebellion in December 14BCE or January 13BCE and in January or February 13 BCE a revolt of convicts.

appears Emperor Cheng and his court believed these calamities arose from heaven's displeasure that he had not appointed an heir.⁹⁴⁷ As a result his nephew, Liu Xin, King of Dingtao (定陶王劉欣), was appointed heir apparent.

Prior to the nomination of the heir apparent, in 12 BCE, the Zhao sisters were allegedly embroiled in the killing of male children of the imperial harem, who were potential heirs apparent.⁹⁴⁸ Dubs outlines the events from the *Hanshu* surrounding the infanticide and this thesis includes the briefest of summaries.⁹⁴⁹ Emperor Cheng told the Beautiful Companion Zhao of a child born to a concubine named Xu. Beautiful Companion Zhao reproached Emperor Cheng's infidelity. Naturally, Beautiful Companion Zhao was concerned for her position and that of her sister. Empress Zhao might be replaced as empress by the mother of this child, jeopardising the Zhao family's power and status. In view of Beautiful Companion Zhao's entreaties, Emperor Cheng promised not to enthrone the child's mother, the Beautiful Companion Xu (許).

Further, it is alleged that the Emperor Cheng later organised the child's death, possibly murdering the infant himself, although Liu Xiang states that the child's mother Xu was ordered to kill the child.⁹⁵⁰ Ban Gu places the killing of this first child in 11 BCE.⁹⁵¹ Liu Xiang states that this murder was according to an agreement between Emperor Cheng and Beautiful Companion Zhao that Xu, nor presumably any other woman, would be installed as empress. Liu Xiang asserts that Emperor Cheng was knowingly involved in the whole affair and watched the child being tied into a basket before it was buried below the wall of the prison.⁹⁵² In 11 BCE, Beautiful Companion Xu was provided poison and killed herself.⁹⁵³ The incident is unpleasant; however, it demonstrates that consorts could depend on a surviving male son to elevate their position, and the existence of such children could be considered a real threat.

⁹⁴⁷ *HS* 10.15a; Dubs II, p. 414.

⁹⁴⁸ *HS* 10.14a; Dubs II, p. 411.

⁹⁴⁹ Dubs II, pp. 370–2. The below information is drawn from Dubs' outline, a summary from *HS* 10. *LNZ* 8.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 236–7 also provides an account.

⁹⁵⁰ *LNZ* 9.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 237.

⁹⁵¹ *HS* 10.14a; Dubs II, p. 411.

⁹⁵² *LNZ* 8.15; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 237.

⁹⁵³ *HS* 10.15b; Dubs II, p. 416.

There was another child of Emperor Cheng who was allegedly killed. This child was born of Emperor Cheng and a slave in the palace. Emperor Cheng again, according to Lu Xiang, ordered the child killed in order not to break his agreement.⁹⁵⁴ The prison warden, who was ordered to kill the child, refused and urged the emperor to reconsider killing his only heir. Thereafter, the child was assigned a wet nurse and cared for. The image of a prison warden disobeying the order of an emperor is likely too incredible and the purpose of this detail is surely to demonstrate the wrong Emperor Cheng was perpetrating. In the end, this child too was killed, and Beautiful Companion Zhao sent a letter to the slave with poison ordering her to commit suicide. After some words of complaint (conveniently ‘recorded’ by Liu Xiang), the slave used the poison to kill herself.

If Liu Xiang wrote the supplementary biography of the Zhao sisters shortly after Emperor Cheng’s death, he likely had access to many contemporary sources within the imperial harem and the slave may indeed have spoken similarly to his record in the *Lienüzhuan*. Liu Xiang concludes that Beautiful Companion Zhao led the Emperor Cheng astray, much like King Yu of Zhou. Certainly, this is consistent with the view of Ban Gu, who reports that as early as 32 BCE two moons were cited in the sky and that this indicated Emperor Cheng was led by *yin*, being female influence.⁹⁵⁵

This double infanticide did not reflect well on Emperor Cheng.⁹⁵⁶ Although he was within his rights to dispose of his own children, it might be seen as contrary to the mandate of heaven to destroy his sons and heirs. The incidents also undermined the power of the Zhao family following Emperor Cheng’s death. The discovery of infanticide led to the removal of the brother and nephew of the Beautiful Companion Zhao from their official positions. It was also suspected that the Beautiful Companion Zhao had poisoned the Emperor Cheng, and Grand Empress Dowager Wang therefore ordered an investigation. Eventually, Empress Dowager Zhao suffered the stigma of her sister’s actions, was dismissed, made a commoner and committed suicide.⁹⁵⁷ The depiction of the Zhao sisters is unfavourable because of their attempt to maintain their own power at the expense of dynastic continuity. Further, Emperor Cheng was criticised for having given himself up to wine and women and, most worryingly,

⁹⁵⁴ LNZ 8.15; trans., O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 237.

⁹⁵⁵ HS 10.3a; Dubs II, p. 378.

⁹⁵⁶ LNZ 8.15; trans. O’Hara, *Women in Early China*, p. 238.

⁹⁵⁷ Loewe states this was due to the actions of Wang Mang, who ‘lost no time in seeing that the two Chao [Zhao] sisters, one of them Ch’eng ti’s Empress and the other his mistress, were degraded and removed from court.’ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 292.

having not provided an heir apparent.⁹⁵⁸ That the infanticide is included in Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan*, unless it was a later insertion, indicates it was well known by contemporaries of the imperial court.⁹⁵⁹ The infanticide of two male children of Emperor Cheng may, however, simply be a convenient story; Emperor Cheng at the time of his accession had not fathered any sons, and he struggled to do so.⁹⁶⁰

Notwithstanding the emphasis on the Zhao sisters in the historical sources, the major power during Emperor Cheng's reign was not the Zhao family (because the sisters were not of any notable family) but the Wang family.⁹⁶¹ This was due in part to Emperor Cheng's mother, Empress Dowager Wang. Unsurprisingly, Emperor Cheng is not viewed favourably by Ban Gu, despite some praise of his posture and manner.⁹⁶² The chapter commences by stating that the Emperor Cheng, when he was merely the heir apparent, became fond of wine and took pleasure in the delights of conviviality.⁹⁶³ The chapter then notes that

he gave himself up to wine and women. The Zhao clan caused disorder within [the palace] and his maternal relatives made themselves masters in the court.⁹⁶⁴

然湛于酒色，趙氏亂內，外家擅朝，言之可為於邑。

Women and excessive female influence are linked to the failure of the emperor and the dynasty.⁹⁶⁵ In the *Hanshu*, Ban Gu includes three memorials from Gu Yong (顧雍).⁹⁶⁶ Gu Yong entreated the Emperor Cheng to desist from his dalliances with women of low class and to ensure he produce an heir to the throne. The memorials take aim at the low-class origins of the Zhao sisters. Certainly, as Loewe highlights, the memorials would not have been included if Ban Gu believed they took aim at his great-aunt.⁹⁶⁷ The Zhao sisters were discredited in Ban Gu's time yet surely Ban Gu is suggesting that the Emperor is ultimately

⁹⁵⁸ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

⁹⁵⁹ Bearing in mind that Liu Xiang died around 6 BCE and Emperor Cheng died in 7 BCE. It also suggests a later publication date than approximately 18 BCE for the *Lienüzhuan*.

⁹⁶⁰ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 157.

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶² *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

⁹⁶³ *HS* 10.2a; Dubs II, p. 374. Ban Gu refers to Confucius, *Analects* 16.5.

⁹⁶⁴ *HS* 10.16b; Dubs II, p. 418.

⁹⁶⁵ After Emperor Cheng, some boy emperors were appointed by Empress Dowager Wang and Wang Mang. Wang Mang was really in control; he later established his own Xin Dynasty (which divides the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties).

⁹⁶⁶ *HS* 85, 3444–50 (29 BCE); 3457–64 (15 BCE); and 3465–72 (12 BCE).

⁹⁶⁷ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 353.

responsible. He allowed his female relatives too much power and allowed the Zhao sisters too much free action. Still, Ban Gu's account suggests women should not be allowed to act as they did in this case, and that their power and that of their families should be limited.

Similarly, Liu Xiang's record of the Zhao sisters is unfavourable, yet they are not derided for low birth so much as poor behaviour. The timing of the account of Liu Xiang (bearing in mind Liu Xiang died only around one year after Emperor Cheng) may mean his damning account of the Zhao sisters is a later addition by another author. Alternatively, it may be that it was quickly added by Liu Xiang himself following the death of Emperor Cheng in 7 BCE. This would explain why Liu Xiang focused on the improper actions of the Emperor Cheng and Beautiful Companion Zhao Hede, rather than those of Empress Dowager Zhao, who outlived Liu Xiang.

Whether the account in the *Lienüzhuan* is Liu Xiang's or the work of another, the story of the Zhao sisters is entirely consistent with the trend of 'women as agents of virtue of chaos'.⁹⁶⁸ The Emperor Cheng is also viewed as lacking

a full measure of responsibility, [and] was all too clearly in the hands of his consorts, even to the point of apparently conniving in their murder of his two sons.⁹⁶⁹

It is fitting, in keeping with this trope, that the time of Emperor Cheng and the Zhao sisters' foreshadowed the fall of the Eastern Han Dynasty. While the finer details of their depiction may be debated, the *Hanshu* ultimately views them, in keeping with other imperial consorts and concubines, as troublesome when ambitious. This is in sharp contrast with Ban Gu's aunt, Ban Jieyu, a concubine of Emperor Cheng who Ban Gu presents as virtuous.⁹⁷⁰ This makes it clear that it is not simply their gender for which they are criticised; the political situation and their identity are also influences. Interestingly, in Liu Xiang's supplementary biography the emperor acts in accordance with an agreement made with Beautiful Companion Zhao Hede to preserve her and her sister's pre-eminence. Here, Liu Xiang places great fault not only with Zhao Hede but also Emperor Cheng. Considering the problematic succession created by the absence of any male heirs of Emperor Cheng (which Liu Xiang

⁹⁶⁸ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 78.

⁹⁶⁹ Loewe, 'Cosmological Context of Sovereignty', p. 347.

⁹⁷⁰ This is something highlighted and discussed by Clark, *Ban Gu's History*, pp. 86–89; she is mentioned by Ban Gu in *HS* 97A–B in Watson, trans., *Selections from Pan Ku*, p. 262. Here, Ban Jieyu anticipates trouble from the Zhao sisters and requests to retire from the harem to wait on the Empress Dowager Wang, a very wise move.

suggests was his own doing), it is likely many in the imperial court shared this dim view of Emperor Cheng.

It is interesting that Liu Xiang's text, as the closest in time to the reign of Emperor Cheng, does not focus on his reign as a time during which the Wang clan rose to power. Ban Gu, on the other hand, makes clear that Emperor Cheng, as the son of the (later) Grand Empress Dowager Wang, elevated his maternal relatives to high offices and privileges.⁹⁷¹ Interestingly, in 14 BCE, after the elevation of Empress Zhao, Emperor Cheng's mother Empress Dowager Wang issued an imperial edict ordering the high officials to establish various sacrifices at the imperial altar.⁹⁷² Perhaps the tumultuous events of Emperor Cheng's reign demanded so much of his attention that his mother, and notably not his wife, assisted him. Certainly, Ban Gu's annals of Emperor Cheng are full of rebellions, natural disasters, religious sacrifice and various natural phenomena or portents. Again, just after the death of Emperor Cheng in 7 BCE, Empress Dowager Wang issued an imperial edict pertaining to sacrifices.⁹⁷³

Allegations of Witchcraft

In view of the system of concubinage, imperial women in the Han Dynasty can hardly be criticised for extramarital sexual practices, which were integral to the system. In any case, Han Dynasty historians generally avoided discussing sexual matters and, as such, expressions of dissatisfaction with political women often took the form of allegations of witchcraft. As will be seen below, Elder Princess Piao certainly used allegations of witchcraft to discredit the Lady Li.⁹⁷⁴

During Emperor Wu's reign the Empress Chen (孝武陳皇后) was removed from her position as empress and it is possible that this was due to her alleged involvement in witchcraft. Indeed, her daughter may have been among those impaled as accomplices in a witchcraft plot;⁹⁷⁵ she may have used witchcraft in order to protect the Empress Chen, who had not given birth to a male heir.⁹⁷⁶ Certainly the scandal was significant and some 300

⁹⁷¹ As discussed earlier, he made all his five maternal uncles full marquises. *HS* 10.5b; Dubs II, p. 275.

⁹⁷² *HS* 10.12b; Dubs II, p. 406.

⁹⁷³ *HS* 10.16a; Dubs II, p. 417.

⁹⁷⁴ Below Elder Princess Piao, p. 224.

⁹⁷⁵ *HS* 6.7a; Dubs II, p. 41, n 7.2.

⁹⁷⁶ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 174.

persons were executed.⁹⁷⁷ Heads of those who were arrested on account of witchcraft and black magic were all impaled in the market place.⁹⁷⁸

As the Emperor Wu advanced in age, he was again susceptible to rumours of witchcraft.⁹⁷⁹ Witchcraft claims de-stabilised the empire and men close to Empress Wei were thrown into prison and died.⁹⁸⁰ One of these men, Chancellor Gongsun He (公孫賀), was married to Empress Wei's sister. The son of the former chancellor Gongsun Jingsheng 公孫敬聲 was accused of embezzling money, having illicit sexual relations with the Princess Yanshi (陽石公主), daughter of Empress Wei and Emperor Wu, and having shamans offer prayers and curses against Emperor Wu.⁹⁸¹ The witchcraft case was established and, thereafter, the office of the chancellor was divided, and two men held the position formerly held by Gongsun He. Princess Yanshi was impeached for witchcraft and put to death.⁹⁸² Subsequently, Emperor Wu was on high alert regarding witchcraft and empowered an official to investigate.⁹⁸³ Unsurprisingly the heir apparent, Liu Zhu, came to the attention of the official. Liu Zhu sought to pre-empt the move against him and arranged for the arrest of the official. This did not go to plan and Empress Wei's attempt to call out the guard and issue weapons caused fighting in the capital.⁹⁸⁴ Five days of fighting ensued and ended in the defeat of Empress Wei and the heir apparent.⁹⁸⁵ Empress Wei later committed suicide. Loewe comments that the official commanded by creating an atmosphere of distrust, alleging that witchcraft emanated from the imperial palace and then investigating the women's quarter until he reached Empress Wei.⁹⁸⁶

⁹⁷⁷ Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 169.

⁹⁷⁸ HS 6.7a; Dubs II, p. 41. Liang Cai, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (Electronic Book, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 3207/8129. It is worth noting Cai provides an illuminating analysis of witchcraft and its impact on the influence of Confucian thought.

⁹⁷⁹ Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 163. See also Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 37–90 and Cai, *Witchcraft and the First Confucian Empire*, p. 3207/8129 – p. 3311/8129.

⁹⁸⁰ Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 161.

⁹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 161. Note that Gongsun Jingsheng was the cousin of Princess Yanshi.

⁹⁸² Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁸³ Ibid., p. 163.

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 163–4. HS 6.37a; Dubs II, p. 114. For a detailed analysis of the events see Cai, *Witchcraft and the First Confucian Empire*, p. 3248/8129.

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

⁹⁸⁶ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 42. Cai, *Witchcraft and the First Confucian Empire*, p. 3228/8129.

Empress Wei's brother and nephew were two of the Han Dynasty's leading generals. Yet the position of her male relatives did not save the empress. They fought a battle against the Lieutenant Chancellor and afterwards fled.⁹⁸⁷ Not only did Empress Wei and her son commit suicide, but two of her daughters were executed and six other relatives died.⁹⁸⁸ Here, the political machinations of internal court rivalries for power are clear. Allegations of witchcraft against women are probably representative of contemporary fears over such behaviours. Witchcraft was viewed as an illegitimate avenue to political power and this is reflected in the fate of those accused of using it. Further, allegations of witchcraft often masked the political machinations of those involved. The reality of the situation in 91 BCE was a battle for power, in which the losers were tainted by allegations of witchcraft. As Loewe remarks, within eight months the Wei family suffered 'virtual extinction'.⁹⁸⁹ It is plausible that the tensions between Empress Wei and her son on the one hand and Emperor Wu on the other must have fuelled the witchcraft plot. That is, as Cai suggests Emperor Wu may have felt threatened by his heir and as a result used witchcraft to 'squash his growing power'.⁹⁹⁰ Cai explains however, that both sides of the dispute were exterminated by Emperor Wu which leaves us to question whether Emperor Wu merely sought to reset the political factions around him. It would not be until Emperor Wu examined the heir apparent's conduct in the light of fear and the accession of Emperor Xuan that the Wei family would be rehabilitated.⁹⁹¹

Empress Zhao and her sister rise to their positions as a direct result of the downfall of Empress Xu and Beautiful Companion Ban. The downfall of Empress Xu and Ban Jieyu was, in part, due to their inability to provide the Emperor Cheng with any live heirs. However, the pretext for their downfall was the Zhao sisters and allegations of witchcraft. Empress Xu and Ban Jieyu were vulnerable when allegations of their using magic spells to regain the emperor's affections were brought forward. In a manner Ban Zhao no doubt learnt from Ban Jieyu, she used her words and the tenets of Confucianism to escape such allegations and retire in safety to care for the empress dowager.⁹⁹² Later, Empress Yan was

⁹⁸⁷ *HS* 6.37a; Dubs II, p. 114.

⁹⁸⁸ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 178. Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 162.

⁹⁸⁹ Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 165.

⁹⁹⁰ Cai, *Witchcraft and the First Confucian Empire*, p. 3267/8129.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 166 and 170. Noting that Emperor Xuan was himself imprisoned when a few months old as part of the witchcraft incident.

⁹⁹² *LNZ* 9.14; trans. O'Hara, *Women in Early China*, pp. 232–5.

allegedly involved in witchcraft and dismissed by Emperor He, and her family were adversely affected by her dismissal.⁹⁹³ However, incidents of witchcraft demonstrate, as Loewe highlights, the divergence between the political practices of the Han Dynasty and the Confucian ideals to which it aspired.⁹⁹⁴

Witchcraft or magic, was according to the sources available to us, occasionally used in attempts to remove the emperor or kill him. For instance, toward the end of 4 BCE three individuals, including the King of Dongping (東平) and Lady Feng (馮媛), engaged in an attempt to kill Emperor Ai. Their attempt failed and the King of Dongping killed himself while the two women were executed.⁹⁹⁵

*Elder Princess Piao*⁹⁹⁶

Political power was familial in the Han Dynasty and, as such, female relatives were important in that sphere.⁹⁹⁷ Han Dynasty women, however, were not the source of legitimacy they could be in imperial Rome. This is because the ultimate legitimacy of an heir derived from his blood tie to his father (the previous emperor). Han empresses dowager, however, did have a determinative influence over which imperial son would be chosen as heir apparent. Imperial women in the Han Dynasty could seriously affect who would succeed the emperor.

The example of Elder Princess Piao (sister of Emperor Jing) manoeuvring her daughter into a marriage with the future emperor demonstrates this. The Elder Princess Piao was interested in the future influence of her daughter and hoped to marry her to the heir apparent, Liu Rong (劉榮), the emperor's oldest son.⁹⁹⁸ Liu Rong's mother, Lady Li (栗姬), refused. Elder Princess Piao then looked to the son of another concubine.⁹⁹⁹ She succeeded in marrying her daughter to the son of Emperor Jing and his concubine Lady Wang. Sima Qian says that Elder Princess Piao was upset by Lady Li's refusal.¹⁰⁰⁰ After this incident the Elder Princess

⁹⁹³ Dull (trans.), *Han Social Structure*, p. 225.

⁹⁹⁴ Loewe, 'The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BCE', p. 166.

⁹⁹⁵ *HS* 11.6b; Dubs III, p. 33.

⁹⁹⁶ Elder Princess, title given to the eldest sister of the emperor.

⁹⁹⁷ Evidence of familial importance is that Elder Princess Piao's son was enfeoffed by the Emperor (his uncle), *SJ* 11; Watson I, p. 313.

⁹⁹⁸ *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 330.

⁹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Piao accused Lady Li of sorcery and slandered her to the emperor.¹⁰⁰¹ She also spoke glowingly of Lady Wang's son, confirming Emperor Jing's high regard for him.¹⁰⁰² Lady Wang helped this plan by suggesting Lady Li as empress at a most inappropriate time.¹⁰⁰³ Elder Princess Piao, working in tandem with Concubine Lady Wang, was instrumental in the removal of Lady Li from favour and of her son as heir apparent, in favour of Lady Wang's son. This incident is testament to the power and influence of the eldest sister of the emperor. It also demonstrates the ability of political women to coordinate their actions as a political block. There is no reason to distrust Sima Qian's account, which offers a revealing insight into court politics and court marriages. It was, furthermore, a highly successful operation, since Lady Wang also became Empress Wang.¹⁰⁰⁴ The emperor's sister was successfully able to capitalise on her proximity to the emperor and ensure her daughter's position.

¹⁰⁰¹ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰⁰² Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid. *HS* 5.5a; Dubs I, p. 316.

Chapter Eleven. The Presentation of Empress Lü

Empress Lü (呂后), later Empress Dowager Lü (呂太后), was the de facto ruler of the Han Dynasty following the death of her husband Emperor Gao in 195 BCE up until her own death in 180 BCE.¹⁰⁰⁵ She was thus the first empress and female emperor of the Han Dynasty. For this reason, an examination of the presentation of her is appropriately penultimate in this thesis. This is because the historical presentation of Empress Lü is informed by events after her death and the broader contest for power within the inner court and the outer court of the imperial palace.

Empress Lü and the Lü family are frequently viewed as a divisive factor in the Han Dynasty, signposting the beginning of a series of threats posed by consort families to the lawful rule of the emperor.¹⁰⁰⁶ It is for this reason that she attracted attention in Han Dynasty histories. In both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* Empress Lü has her own dedicated imperial annals, testament to the prominent political role she played following her husband's death. This stands apart from all other imperial women, except for the treatment of Empress Dowager Yuan.¹⁰⁰⁷ A brief account of most empresses resided in the collective biographies of empresses rather than in separate imperial annals. Most accounts of empresses and imperial women such as consorts are biographies as opposed to the annals format used for emperors and imperial men.¹⁰⁰⁸

Thus, Empress Lü receiving her own imperial annals in both texts and a brief outline in the collective biographies of empresses is significant.¹⁰⁰⁹ It also makes clear that, following her son's death, she was functioning as emperor, not the young Shao (少) emperors (sons of Emperor Hui). Indeed, after the death of her son Emperor Hui in 188 BCE, Empress Lü issued decrees in the manner of an emperor.¹⁰¹⁰ Further, Empress Lü is referred to as *nü zhu*

¹⁰⁰⁵ For ease of reference, Empress Lü rather than Empress Dowager Lü is used throughout.

¹⁰⁰⁶ This is a view perpetuated still in the case of Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *HS* 98. C.S. Goodrich, 'Two Chapters in The Life of an Empress of the Later Han', *HJAS* 26 (1966), p. 188.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁰⁹ *SJ* 49 and *HS* 97 for collective biography. *SJ* 9, *HS* 2 and *HS* 3 for the imperial annals dedicated to Empress Lü.

¹⁰¹⁰ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 271, Nienhauser II, p. 115. *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, p. 192. Often construed as imperial decrees; see Nienhauser II, pp. 115–6, n. 63.

(女主) meaning female ruler.¹⁰¹¹ Additionally, she used *zhen* (朕) for 'I', a form generally used only by emperors.¹⁰¹² This treatment of Empress Lü distinguishes her from other empresses in the Han Dynasty.

Dutiful Consort

As the wife of Emperor Gaozu even before he became emperor, she is presented by Sima Qian as a partner in her husband's endeavours.¹⁰¹³ Sima Qian even says Empress Lü 'aided' her husband on his conquest of the empire.¹⁰¹⁴ She was also an important political asset and a good wife (i.e., supportive of her husband's activities). Further, the *Shiji* makes clear that by marrying Gaozu, Empress Lü was marrying beneath her.¹⁰¹⁵ Her mother protested to her father that she could have been married to the Magistrate of Pei (沛), which although significant makes it clear that Gaozu was by no means of any high or significant station.¹⁰¹⁶ There is, then, some fortune at play in the marriage of Empress Lü and the Emperor Gaozu. Considering what else Sima Qian says regarding Empress Lü, it is likely such an anecdote was designed to reflect well on Emperor Gaozu rather than Empress Lü.

The early part of Empress Lü's biography in both the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* catalogues her support of Gaozu and the birth of their children, Princess Yuan and the future Emperor Hui. It might be said that there is no ill sentiment against Empress Lü in *Shiji* 49, which contains the annals of Emperor Gao.¹⁰¹⁷ The *Annals of Emperor Gao* includes only favourable mentions of Empress Lü.¹⁰¹⁸ A prime example is when Gaozu is injured and Empress Lü sends for a skilled doctor.¹⁰¹⁹ Her concern for her husband's health is moving and she is dutiful in her role as wife.

She is also the object of a favourable omen when it is declared she will become the most honoured woman in the world.¹⁰²⁰ It is significant that the omen is pronounced by an old

¹⁰¹¹ Something highlighted by Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', p. 54.

¹⁰¹² McMahon, 'Female Rulers', pp. 195 and 197.

¹⁰¹³ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 267, Nienhauser II, p. 107.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.* *HS* 3.1a; Dubs I, p. 191.

¹⁰¹⁵ *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 52, Nienhauser II, p. 11.

¹⁰¹⁶ *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 53, Nienhauser II, pp. 11–3.

¹⁰¹⁷ *SJ* 49; Watson I, pp. 324–5.

¹⁰¹⁸ *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 51, Nienhauser II, p. 1.

¹⁰¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁰²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

man passing by as Empress Lü works in the fields. The old man examines her son (the future Emperor Hui) and comments Empress Lü will become the most honoured woman in the world ‘because of this boy’.¹⁰²¹ Such anecdotes all communicate a positive, virtuous and legitimate image of Empress Lü as a suitable imperial consort to the first Han Dynasty emperor. The omens, and her actions in the years of marriage before taking the empire, present her as a legitimate wife. Whether this enables her to be a legitimate political actor is questionable.

Regency

The sources report that Empress Lü acted as virtual regent during and after the reign of her son, Emperor Hui. Indeed, Sima Qian does include an annal for Emperor Hui.¹⁰²² Ban Gu in *Hanshu* 2 separates the reign of Emperor Hui from that of his mother.¹⁰²³ Emperor Hui was young, being around sixteen years of age when he assumed the emperorship. It is not likely he was ready for the full responsibilities of the emperor. Ban Gu states Emperor Hui was five years of age when Gaozu became emperor and that Gaozu died in the twelfth year of his reign, making Emperor Hui approximately seventeen years of age.¹⁰²⁴ Ban Gu states he was capped (i.e., had his coming of age ceremony) in the fourth year of his reign when he was aged twenty.¹⁰²⁵ It is not surprising that his mother Empress Lü, who had been at his father’s side through a protracted battle for power and during his subsequent reign as emperor, would act in the manner of a regent. The reason provided for the power of Empress Lü is that Emperor Hui was so horrified by his mother’s cruel behaviour he retreated from power. Ban Gu comments she damaged his perfect virtue.¹⁰²⁶ The cruelty attributed to Empress Lü will be discussed further below.

Empress Lü’s assumption of such imperial power and the events after her reign (namely, the downfall of the Lü family) negatively impact her image in the *Shiji*. So far, the image of a powerful but supportive Empress has emerged and yet Sima Qian’s account of Empress Lü is also viewed as hostile. This is because of the incidents of cruelty he ascribes to her and

¹⁰²¹ Ibid.

¹⁰²² Also noted by Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 76.

¹⁰²³ *HS* 2.6b; Dubs I, pp. 186–87.

¹⁰²⁴ *HS* 2.1; Dubs I, p. 173.

¹⁰²⁵ *HS* 2.5a; Dubs I, p. 182. Note that this capping occurs after he establishes the Empress Zhang earlier that same year.

¹⁰²⁶ *HS* 2.6b; Dubs I, pp. 186–7.

the way in which, from the beginning of *Shiji* 9, he presents her as lacking all virtue and pursuing self-advancement.

It is interesting to contrast the self-advancement Sima Qian ascribes to Empress Lü with the actions of her husband, Emperor Gaozu. Gaozu declines the position of emperor three times before accepting it at the insistence of those around him, while Empress Lü is constantly presented as showing no such modesty.¹⁰²⁷ Gaozu's 'modesty' was a conventional way of legitimising his new role as emperor. Sima Qian's agenda here is clear: modesty and self-deprecation are Confucian virtues and Sima Qian provides Emperor Gaozu with these characteristics. Considering the war that was waged by Liu Bang, as he then was, the story of three refusals of power is a fiction to legitimate Emperor Gaozu. Empress Lü is provided no such beneficial treatment.

On the contrary, various cruel actions are prominent in Empress Lü's biography in the *Shiji*. It is worth noting that the cruelty in *Shiji* 9 is reflected in *Hanshu* 97 rather than *Hanshu* 2 and 3. This is arguably on account of the public-private divide Ban Gu creates through the *Hanshu*, such that public acts as emperor are chronicled in the imperial annals and the private lives appear in the collective biographies.¹⁰²⁸ Empress Lü apparently advised Emperor Gaozu to execute Peng Yue (彭越) because exiling him would only cause trouble later. She also allegedly tricked Peng Yue into accompanying her back to the capital by claiming he would be pardoned, knowing full well there was no pardon.¹⁰²⁹ This, although cruel, reveals her as a clever and resourceful woman when making political decisions.

The most famous, however, is the 'human pig' incident with Lady Qi (戚夫人). Empress Lü later cut off Lady Qi's hands and feet, plucked out her eyes, burned her ears, gave her a potion to drink which made her dumb, and had her thrown into the privy, calling her the 'human pig'.¹⁰³⁰ The simplest explanation for this story is that the standard histories are biased regarding Empress Lü.¹⁰³¹ On this basis, the entire human pig incident could be

¹⁰²⁷ *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 75, Nienhauser II, p. 65-66. It is worth noting that in declining the throne three times Gaozu was following much earlier precedent from the Western Zhou and providing legitimacy.

¹⁰²⁸ *HS* 2; Dubs I, p. 167.

¹⁰²⁹ *SJ* 90; Watson I, p. 152. There is an incident with Empress Livia which somewhat mirrors this; she offered clemency to King Archelaus of Cappadocia if he came to Rome, but when he arrived there charges were brought against him and he ended up committing suicide. Tacitus, *Annals* 2.42.3.

¹⁰³⁰ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 269, Nienhauser II, p. 111. Nienhauser refers to Lady Qi as a 'Human hog'.

¹⁰³¹ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 130.

discounted as a dramatic device to explain the prominence of Empress Lü while simultaneously reflecting well on Empress Hui.

Proceeding on the basis that the incident did in fact take place, however, it is important to note the Han Dynasty was a tough society and cruelty was not unusual. Emperor Gaozu himself at one point apparently dressed 2000 women as soldiers and sent them out to meet the enemy to be killed so he could escape the battle.¹⁰³² The difference between the two incidents is significant. Gaozu acted in war and used strategy (albeit unpleasant strategy) to save his army from defeat. Empress Lü is given the motivation of hatred for Lady Qi (and implied jealousy) by the historical sources.¹⁰³³ Empress Lü's gender is thus used to present the situation as more horrific.

Female cruelty is portrayed as wilder and more personal than male cruelty. This in turn draws on the more elaborated, philosophical characterisation of women as less rational than men and less capable of perceiving the wider perspective.¹⁰³⁴

Hans Van Ess argues Sima Qian suggests that Emperor Gaozu shares responsibility for the fate of Lady Qi and her son the King of Zhao because he failed to show Empress Lü the high esteem he ought to according to the *Book of Odes*.¹⁰³⁵ That is, his divided affections caused trouble between the ladies. Van Ess also suggests that Sima Qian presents Empress Lü's fear as largely responsible for her cruelty. Lady Qi and her son Liu Ruyi (劉如意 [刘如意], King of Zhao) threatened the position of Empress Lü and that of the heir apparent, Emperor Hui.¹⁰³⁶

The King of Zhao was a possible alternative heir apparent as he was a son of Emperor Gaozu and Lady Qi. As a mother and wife, it makes complete sense for Empress Lü upon the death of her husband to remove the possible rival for the throne and his mother.¹⁰³⁷ Sima Qian takes pains to portray the son of Lady Qi and Emperor Gaozu, Ruyi, as a preferable heir

¹⁰³² *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 69, Nienhauser II, p. 53.

¹⁰³³ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 268, Nienhauser II, p. 109. Where Watson refers to hatred, Nienhauser refers to resentment on the part of Empress Lü.

¹⁰³⁴ Dixon, 'Domineering Dowagers and Scheming Concubines', p. 215.

¹⁰³⁵ Hans Van Ess, 'Praise and Slander: the Evocation of Empress Lü in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*', *Nan Nü* 8.2 (2006), p. 249.

¹⁰³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 231–2.

¹⁰³⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 268, Nienhauser II, p. 109. Ruyi was eventually killed, although Sima Qian claims Emperor Hui tried to protect the boy.

apparent to Emperor Hui,¹⁰³⁸ stating that Emperor Gaozu felt Ruyi was strong like him while Hui was weak and that several times Ruyi was nearly made heir apparent.¹⁰³⁹ If this reflects sentiment at the time, it would suggest that Empress Lü was right to fear her son might be replaced, in which case it was wise to act first upon the death of her husband. It is interesting that Sima Qian treats Ruyi as a young child; he was thus perhaps not a true contender to be heir apparent during Emperor Gaozu's lifetime, as Sima Qian might have us believe.¹⁰⁴⁰

Chen has argued that the struggle between Empress Lü and Lady Qi needs to be reframed in consideration of the very dangerous environment of the imperial court.¹⁰⁴¹ Empress Lü sought the assistance of Zhang Liang (張良) to ensure her son's position as heir apparent when Emperor Gaozu was considering making Lady Qi's son the heir instead. Chen states that Zhang Liang likely assisted Empress Lü due to:

- the powerful positions many Lü family members held; and
- the attitude a new emperor (such as Lady Qi's son) might adopt towards old supporters of Emperor Gaozu and Empress Lü (including Zhang Liang).¹⁰⁴²

It can also be said that Sima Qian presents the rivalry between the two women as one of petty jealousy when, in reality, a lot more than jealousy was at stake; life and death hung in the balance.¹⁰⁴³ As Chen astutely highlights, while Sima Qian and others have emphasised apparent flaws in Empress Lü, they have not addressed the faithlessness of the emperor and his disloyalty to their son.¹⁰⁴⁴ The imperial court was certainly not a place conducive to best behaviour.

In the human pig incident involving Lady Qi, it is the reaction of Empress Lü's son which is most damning and, perhaps, most important. Further, it has a place of prominence in the *Shiji* 9 for a reason.¹⁰⁴⁵ Ban Gu says Emperor Hui's virtue was damaged as a result and 'it

¹⁰³⁸ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 72.

¹⁰³⁹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 267, Nienhauser II, pp. 106–7.

¹⁰⁴⁰ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 268, Nienhauser II, p. 109. Note that Ruyi is at this point a boy. He was certainly younger than Emperor Hui (his protector on one occasion). Emperor Hui was only 17 at the time of his father's death, suggesting Ruyi must have been quite young.

¹⁰⁴¹ Chen, 'Pan Chao's Nü Chieh', p. 237.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 239. Dull, trans., *Han Social Structure*, p. 258, portrays Empress Lü as the 'jealous empress'.

¹⁰⁴³ Chen, 'Pan Chao's Nü Chieh', p. 239. Note that T'ung-tsu Ch'ü equally describes this as jealousy.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴⁵ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 269, Nienhauser II, p. 111.

was very sad indeed'.¹⁰⁴⁶ The incident was presented by Sima Qian as rendering Emperor Hui incapable of ruling. Sima Qian claims to record the direct speech of Emperor Hui: 'No human could have done such a deed as this! Since I am your son, I will never be fit to rule the empire.'¹⁰⁴⁷ Sima Qian makes explicit what would have been apparent to any contemporary Confucian, that Empress Lü's actions reflect on her son. Emperor Hui's comment also refers to the close association between mothers and sons. Familial punishments were only abolished during the Han Dynasty. Previously, the entire family of a criminal would be punished.¹⁰⁴⁸ As Raphals points out, the conversation between Empress Lü and her son is unlikely to have been observed by a witness.¹⁰⁴⁹ Rather, the incident is simply a fabrication that helps project Sima Qian's image of Empress Lü, an image designed to be monstrous. The account also provides an excuse for Emperor Hui's inactivity and serves to disassociate him from her.¹⁰⁵⁰ It is better to blame a woman for a man's failing than to direct the blame to him. It cannot be accepted that Empress Lü reigned in all but name during Emperor Hui's rule because her cruelty so shocked her son that he could not rule. Rather, his relative youth and possible weakness were likely the primary reasons.

It was alleged that Empress Lü organised the murder of four of Emperor Gao's sons.¹⁰⁵¹ Early in the *Basic Annals of Emperor Gao*, Sima Qian recounts that Empress Lü was concerned about what would happen when Gaozu died. She apparently specifically questioned whether the officials could be trusted and wondered whether they should be killed.¹⁰⁵² Here, it is important and significant that Empress Lü's concern for the future after Gaozu's death is obvious.¹⁰⁵³ This would indicate that Empress Lü's actions need to be viewed in the context of political power struggles, and a struggle for survival. Such concerns certainly contextualise the murder of Lady Qi by Empress Lü as a political decision rather than merely a private jealousy.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *HS* 2.6b; Dubs I, pp. 186–7.

¹⁰⁴⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 269, Nienhauser II, p. 111. Note where Watson translates direct speech to Empress Lü, Nienhauser does not. Nevertheless, it is clear the sentiment was sent via messenger.

¹⁰⁴⁸ *HS* 4.5b; Dubs I, p. 233.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, pp. 35–6.

¹⁰⁵¹ *HS* 2; Dubs I, p. 169, *HS* 2.3b; Dubs I, p. 178; *HS* 3.5a; Dubs I, p. 200.

¹⁰⁵² *SJ* 8; Watson I, p. 84, Nienhauser II, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵³ *Ibid.*

Emperor

Putting aside the presentation of the official histories of Empress Lü, the death of her only son, Emperor Hui, in 188 BCE must have been a politically challenging time for Empress Lü. Nevertheless, it was the death of her son that prompted even further supremacy for Empress Lü. His death while on the one hand presenting a challenge to her power base also provided her the opportunity to place a younger more malleable emperor on the throne. It was at this time Empress Lü ordered military operations and the movement of troops in the manner of an emperor.¹⁰⁵⁴ Further, Empress Lü made edicts in the manner of an emperor.¹⁰⁵⁵

Following her son's death, Empress Lü is presented as concerned for her safety. Emperor Hui 'left no grown sons, and so the empress is afraid'.¹⁰⁵⁶ When Emperor Hui died he had only young children, and none of them were the son of the reigning Empress Zhang (张嫣). Sima Qian goes so far as to suggest Empress Lü does not mourn the death of her only son Emperor Hui when he comments no tears fall from her eyes at his death.¹⁰⁵⁷ This is a very clear example of bias. Sima Qian previously informs readers Empress Lü only has two children and that she would be honoured because of Emperor Hui. To lose her son when he was in his early twenties when, through him, a she had a lifetime of guaranteed proximity to power was potentially disastrous, in addition to possibly personally upsetting. In fairness, Sima Qian does identify the quandary that Emperor Hui's death created, with his sons being so young.¹⁰⁵⁸

Emperor Hui's death was unfortunate for Empress Lü as it created instability and the necessity of:

- 1) taking control in her own right;
- 2) finding a suitable heir among her grandchildren; or
- 3) appointing an emperor from outside her bloodline and thus risk losing control.

With the appointment of two young emperors in succession, Emperor Qianshao (前少帝) (188–184 BCE) and Emperor Houshao (後少帝) (184–180 BCE), Empress Lü, in all but

¹⁰⁵⁴ *HS* 3.3b; Dubs I, p. 198, here she directs cavalry to relocate from one command to another.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 271, Nienhauser II, p. 115. *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, p. 192. Empress Lü provided a valuable historical precedent to later women, such as Wu Zetian Empress Regnant of the Tang Dynasty.

¹⁰⁵⁶ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 270, Nienhauser II, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

name and gender, was Emperor of the Han Dynasty.¹⁰⁵⁹ As such, the death of Emperor Hui while challenging had presented opportunity to Empress Lü. It was opportunity she took advantage of.

Empress Zhang allegedly took the eldest son of Emperor Hui, Liu Gong (劉恭), the child of a concubine and claimed him as her own.¹⁰⁶⁰ He then became Emperor Qianshao. Sima Qian goes so far to say she pretended to be pregnant and substituted the child of the concubine as her own.¹⁰⁶¹ While Sima Qian attributes this action to Empress Zhang, Ban Gu attributes it to Empress Lü.¹⁰⁶² If true, this attests to the political desperation of Han Dynasty women at the highest levels, demonstrating that early in the dynasty a maternal relationship to the heir apparent was considered vital. If false, the incident makes a strange inclusion designed to reflect poorly on either Empress Zhang or Empress Lü. Either way, Sima Qian indicates an heir of Emperor Hui succeeded to the throne.

Empress Lü allegedly had Liu Gong (Emperor Qianshao) removed and placed in prison due to his making threats against her.¹⁰⁶³ The threats stemmed from the discovery by Emperor Qianshao that he was not the biological son of Empress Zhang but only adopted by her after Empress Lü executed his mother. The Emperor Qianshao then remarked that he would make Empress Zhang pay for his mother's death. The entire incident lacks credibility, given that it was (albeit later) common practice for sons of consorts to be raised by the empress of their father if they were nominated heir apparent. Considering the large number of female consorts to one emperor, family questions were understandably complex.

It is the reaction Sima Qian gives Empress Lü that is most interesting; fearing he will start a rebellion she confines and later kills her grandson (yet preserves Empress Zhang).¹⁰⁶⁴ Why would Empress Lü act to protect Empress Zhang to the detriment of her grandson? Ban Gu

¹⁰⁵⁹ Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, pp. 289–90. Loewe summarises Empress Lü in this way: ‘she had started by being content to rule behind the scenes, while two infant Emperors had been nominally enthroned; and she has seen that some of her closest relatives were appointed to the highest offices of the state. Finally she had been able to assume imperial rule in her own person...’ Like those female rulers who followed in the centuries after the Han Dynasty, Empress Lü ruled ‘where men were unfit or unavailable.’ McMahon, ‘Women Rulers’, p. 181.

¹⁰⁶⁰ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273; Nienhauser II, pp. 118–9.

¹⁰⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶² *HS* 3.1a; Dubs I, p. 191.

¹⁰⁶³ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273; Nienhauser II, pp. 121–2.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

states that Empress Zhang was a granddaughter of Empress Lü through her daughter.¹⁰⁶⁵ On this view, Emperor Hui's empress was his niece, but due to their different surnames they were nevertheless permitted to marry. If it is accepted that the young Emperor Liu Gong died, then the reasoning seems most odd. Sima Qian offers the explanation that he was growing older and threatened his mother.¹⁰⁶⁶ This explanation also fails because he had not had time to grow much older. His father, Emperor Hui, was roughly twenty-two when he died and cannot have had a son much older than ten years of age at that time (and likely one much younger), and the young emperor only reigned for around four years. Perhaps Liu Gong had some mental illness and was unfit to rule or died of natural causes. It is worth remembering life expectancy was not always high in the Han Dynasty.

While it is possible Empress Lü arranged the killing of her grandson (the son of her son Emperor Hui) the beneficial treatment meted out to her grandson Zhang Yan (張偃), the son of her daughter Princess Yuan of Lu and brother to Empress Zhang, poses the question why prefer one grandson over the other. Zhang Yan, as King of Lu, was orphaned young and Empress Lü enfeoffed two of his half-brothers to assist him rule.¹⁰⁶⁷ It seems strange to take such care with one grandson and kill the other, especially when familial relationships were so important. The dynastic histories do not reflect the nuances of interpersonal relationships which may explain the situation. Empress Lü promoted her family members and worked hard to ensure her own son remained heir apparent. Considering this, to dispose of a grandson so carelessly seems illogical. However, when we consider Empress Lü's preference for her maternal rather than paternal grandson the explanation is clearer, perhaps any heir of the Liu family was too great a threat. With the death of the young Liu Gong, Empress Lü dictated the affairs of the empire.¹⁰⁶⁸

As an emperor would, Empress Lü distributed titles to her relatives. She made her younger sister Lü Xu (呂須) Marchioness of Linguang in her own right and filled other positions with male Lü family members.¹⁰⁶⁹ The included her nephews as princes and marquises. As Sima Qian records:

¹⁰⁶⁵ *HS* 3.1a; Dubs I, p. 191.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273, Nienhauser II, pp. 120–1.

¹⁰⁶⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 276, Nienhauser II, p. 126.

¹⁰⁶⁸ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273, Nienhauser II, p. 115.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273, Nienhauser II, pp. 120–1. *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 323 ff. *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, pp. 191–2.

Because of the authority, she wielded, Empress Lü was able to make kings of three of her family, exercising power as she pleased and dominating the government.¹⁰⁷⁰

It was at this time that three Lü men—Lü Tai, Lü Chan and Lü Lu—became generals.¹⁰⁷¹ It is only at this time, in 188 BCE that Sima Qian comments the Lü family started to rise to power. Prior to the creation of kings, Empress Lü had made four male relatives princes (with a fifth relative succeeding one of them):

- Lü Tai (呂台), son of her older brother Lü Ze (呂澤), was appointed as Prince Su of Lü (呂肅王) in 186 BCE.
- Lü Jia (呂嘉), Lü Tai's son became Prince of Lü (呂) upon his father's death.
- Lü Tong (呂通), Lü Tai's son, was appointed as Prince of Yan (燕) in 181 BCE.
- Lü Chan (呂產), son of her older brother Lü Ze (呂澤), was appointed as Prince of Liang (梁王) in 181 BCE.
- Lü Lu (呂祿), son of her older brother Lü Shizhi (呂釋之), was appointed as Prince of Zhao(趙) in 181 BCE.¹⁰⁷²

A further six family members were elevated as marquises.¹⁰⁷³ The sequence of appointments demonstrates that as her nephews came of age and she progressed into old age, she installed them as princes to help strengthen the Lü powerbase and prepare it for her absence. Indeed, *Shiji* 9 contains a litany of political machinations regarding Lü family members holding or taking important position.

Sima Qian details the imprisonment of Liu You, King of Zhao. His imprisonment was due to his preference for a concubine over his queen, who was from the Lü family.¹⁰⁷⁴ His queen then slandered him to the Empress Lü, who acted on accusations of sedition.¹⁰⁷⁵ Sima Qian recounts a powerful song composed by Liu You while in prison. It rails against Lü power and Lü women and seeks heaven's revenge against the Lü clan.¹⁰⁷⁶ Following Liu You's internment and death an eclipse of the sun occurred, which Sima Qian reports made Empress

¹⁰⁷⁰ *SJ* 10; Watson I, p. 286; Nienhauser II, p. 147. The three kings were Lü Chan (呂產), King of Liang(梁), Lü Lu (呂祿), King of Zhao(趙) and Lü Tong(呂通), King of Yan(燕).

¹⁰⁷¹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 270, Nienhauser II, pp. 112–3.

¹⁰⁷² *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, p. 192.

¹⁰⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁴ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 274, Nienhauser II, p. 123. *HS* 3.4a; Dubs I, p. 199, see n.3.

¹⁰⁷⁵ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 274, Nienhauser II, p. 123.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *SJ* 9; Watson I, pp. 274–5, Nienhauser II, p. 123.

Lü uneasy.¹⁰⁷⁷ Ban Gu states that in the third year of Empress Lü's reign the Yangzi river flooded and more than 4000 families died.¹⁰⁷⁸ Indeed, the *Hanshu* states a further flood occurred in the eighth and final year of Empress Lü's reign in which 10,000 families were carried away by the waters.¹⁰⁷⁹ Additionally, in the third year Ban Gu states a star appeared in daytime.¹⁰⁸⁰ These natural phenomena in the *Hanshu* and *Shiji* seem to undermine the legitimacy of Empress Lü and her reign.¹⁰⁸¹

Towards the end of her reign, when she suffered apparent illness, Sima Qian's recounts that Empress Lü started to worry about the continuation of her legacy and, as a result, elevated all sorts of people to positions of power.¹⁰⁸² Her testamentary edict bequeaths money to many kings and officials in addition to elevating King of Lü as prime minister and a Lü girl as empress to the young emperor.¹⁰⁸³ Sima Qian presents this as in an attempt to bind her family to power.¹⁰⁸⁴

Sima Qian describes some odd familial behaviour within the Lü clan. Of note is an incident where Empress Lü assisted a female member of the Lü clan against her husband, Liu Hui, the King of Liang (then transferred to be King of Zhao). Sima Qian states that the queen, a Lü woman, poisoned the King's concubine and that he committed suicide as a result. Empress Lü then apparently declared he had abandoned his duties and deprived his heir of the title.¹⁰⁸⁵ Sima Qian includes these rather extraneous details because Liu Hui is a member of the Liu family and it demonstrates how such men were (unfairly) mistreated under Empress Lü.

In her will the empress appointed one of her family, Lü Chan, to be Prime Minister and another as empress for the boy emperor.¹⁰⁸⁶ The valedictory edict also appointed two

¹⁰⁷⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 275, Nienhauser II, p. 124.

¹⁰⁷⁸ *HS* 3.3a; Dubs I, p. 196.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *HS* 3.5a; Dubs I, p. 200.

¹⁰⁸⁰ *HS* 3.3b; Dubs I, p. 197.

¹⁰⁸¹ Natural phenomena were given religious significance by the Han Dynasty. Later, in recording Emperor Wen's reign, the *Hanshu* notes one of his edicts indicated that heaven exposes poor leadership through calamities to give warning of a state of misgovernment. *HS* 4.9a; Dubs I, p. 241 and Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁸² *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 275, Nienhauser II, pp. 124–5.

¹⁰⁸³ *HS* 3.5b; Dubs I, p. 201.

¹⁰⁸⁴ *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 325.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 275, Nienhauser II, p. 124.

¹⁰⁸⁶ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 277, Nienhauser II, p. 127. This emperor is deposed and Emperor Wen (one of Emperor Gao's sons and thus a member of the Liu family) was installed.

members of her family to the positions of Chancellor of State and General of the Army.¹⁰⁸⁷ Two of Emperor Gaozu's sons and one grandson continued to rule a kingdom each. With Empress Lü's death, the Lü clan was successfully challenged and a Liu emperor installed.¹⁰⁸⁸ Having regard to the incident of Liu You before Empress Lü's death, the mandate of heaven caused the fall of the Lü family from power.¹⁰⁸⁹

It is apparent that Empress Lü was supremely powerful in her control of the Han Dynasty. Her grip on the state was assisted by the large Lü family and its cohort of male members, who could be placed into important positions. This powerbase did not, however, find approval at the time, as the sudden downfall of the Lü family following Empress Lü's death in 180 BCE attests. Even now Empress Lü is still presented as 'greedy for power' and reaching beyond her allotted place as an imperial woman.¹⁰⁹⁰

The Officials' Long-Term Plan

Setting aside Empress Lü for one moment, the most telling comments from Sima Qian come when he discusses two officials, Cheng Ping (陳平 [陈平]) and Zhou Bo (周勃). In a small but significant and nuanced section of the *Shiji* 9, Sima Qian provides us an insight into the long game these two officials were playing. They had made an oath to Emperor Gaozu that if anyone not of the Liu family became a king, they would unite to attack him. When Lü family members appointed as kings another man, Wang Ling (王陵), advised Cheng Ping and Zhou Bo that they could not stand idly by. Cheng Ping and Zhou Bo responded that while Wang Ling was good at speaking out in court, he was no match for them when it came to ensuring the continuance of the Liu family.¹⁰⁹¹

Sima Qian clearly presents that there is a long-term plan from these two officials to return the Liu family to power, likely once Empress Lü died. That she was so untouchable in life is testament to her power and significance. Further, in her first year of rule Empress Lü made Feng Wuze (馮無擇), a loyal follower of Gaozu and palace secretary, a marquis.¹⁰⁹² It is clear that, far from having discarded those who had worked for Gaozu's elevation in the

¹⁰⁸⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 277, Nienhauser II, p. 127. Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *HS* 3.5a–3.8a; Dubs I, pp. 200–10.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *SJ* 49; Watson I, p. 325. Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', p. 51.

¹⁰⁹¹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 271, Nienhauser II, p. 117.

¹⁰⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 272.

battles predating his emperorship, Empress Lü was still surrounded by and apparently enjoyed harmonious relations with those followers in 188 BCE.¹⁰⁹³ It is these two individuals who would come back to haunt the Lü family after Empress Lü's death.¹⁰⁹⁴

Sima Qian presents the Lü family as conniving for power once Empress Lü died.¹⁰⁹⁵ Throughout her life she had kept the Lü clan largely in control of government; as such, was there any need after her death for the Lü clan to overthrow that same government? It may be that the plotting of the Lü clan was rather reactive than proactive. Having lost their centrepiece in Empress Lü, they understood maintaining their power and the reign of the young Liu Hong would be difficult. The issue, then, was not so much Empress Lü, with whom Cheng Ping and Zhou Bo did not quarrel, but with her family. Still, the action they took against Liu Hong—a legitimate heir and emperor—was problematic for the Liu succession.

Ban Gu states that in the fifth year of Empress Lü's reign, the future Emperor Wu began calling himself emperor.¹⁰⁹⁶ This act of rebellion before the death of Empress Lü means the power struggle commenced earlier than Sima Qian would have readers believe. This arguably further calls into question the legitimacy of Emperor Wu.

Legacy

Despite the monstrous image of Empress Lü in the *Shiji*, Sima Qian concludes by suggesting that there was peace while she ruled.

In the reign of Emperor Hui and Empress Lü, the common people succeeded in putting behind them the sufferings of the age of the Warring States and ruler and subject alike sought rest in surcease of action. Therefore, Emperor Hui sat with folded hands and unruffled garments and Empress Lü, though a woman ruling in the manner of an emperor, conducted the business of government without ever leaving her private chambers, and the world was at peace. Punishments were seldom meted out and evil-doers were rare, while the people applied themselves to the tasks of farming, and food and clothing became abundant.¹⁰⁹⁷

¹⁰⁹³ *HS* 3.2b; Dubs I, p. 195.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *SJ* 9; Watson I, pp. 277–84, Nienhauser II, p. 105–37.

¹⁰⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹⁰⁹⁶ *HS* 3.4a; Dubs I, p. 198.

¹⁰⁹⁷ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 284, Nienhauser II, p. 137. Nienhauser's translation: 'Empress Lü as a female ruler announced [she would issue] the imperial decrees...'

太史公曰：孝惠皇帝、高后之時，黎民得離戰國之苦，君臣俱欲休息乎無為，故惠帝垂拱，高后女主稱制，政不出房戶，天下晏然。刑罰罕用，罪人是希。民務稼穡，衣食滋殖。

In this statement, perhaps Sima Qian sees the people benefiting from the internal squabbles of the imperial court.¹⁰⁹⁸ Such a proposition would be supported by the idea of Daoism and ‘doing nothing’ which, Watson suggests, Sima Qian uses to contrast the extreme control and regimentation of the Qin Dynasty.¹⁰⁹⁹

Like Sima Qian, Ban Gu finishes his imperial annals of Empress Lü with praise, stating that

the world was quiet, punishments and other penalties were seldom used, the people were busy in sowing and harvesting, and clothing and food multiplied and were abundant.¹¹⁰⁰
不出房閭，而天下晏然，刑罰罕用，民務稼穡，衣食滋殖。

Here it appears Ban Gu merely parrots Sima Qian. This is perhaps not surprising, as Clark comments much of Ban Gu’s *Hanshu* is other people’s work.¹¹⁰¹ The assessments also appear inconsistent; as Raphals has highlighted, Empress Lü is presented as an effective ruler and yet a moral degenerate.¹¹⁰² Perhaps the error lies in assuming these things are inconsistent, as the politics of the imperial court had little relevance to the common people. Is there, then, a greater question in Sima Qian’s work as to the importance of the mandate of heaven? Sima Qian clearly states the mandate of heaven was for the Liu family and yet while Empress Lü ruled without the mandate of heaven, the empire was at peace and prosperous.

Either way, Sima Qian’s exploration of Empress Lü was an analysis of court politics. It is also entirely possible that, considering the *Shiji* was begun by Sima Tan, Sima Qian’s father, the father wrote the first sections and Sima Qian the conclusion, or vice versa.¹¹⁰³ It is worth noting that during the reign of Empress Lü (with Emperor Hui), walls were built to defend

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ibid., n. 12. Sima Qian was not enthralled with the Qin Dynasty and its policies.

¹¹⁰⁰ *HS* 3.8a; Dubs I, p. 210.

¹¹⁰¹ Clark, Ban Gu’s History, p. 39.

¹¹⁰² Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 77.

¹¹⁰³ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, pp. 41–2, suggests that Sima Tan wrote the first section and Sima Qian the conclusion. W. H. Nienhauser (trans.), *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, Vol. 2 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 141, suggests it is Sima Qian who wrote the first section and Sima Tan the conclusion. I tend to agree with Markley, although there is no reason to assume that it is clear cut; the entire chapter may be a reworking and expansion of Sima Tan’s original contributions, and this might also help explain the dichotomous treatment of Empress Lü.

the capital, Changan.¹¹⁰⁴ The building of the wall and raising of workers to assist is a regular feature of Ban Gu's *Hanshu*.¹¹⁰⁵ It receives five mentions in the *Annal of Emperor Hui* by Ban Gu and thus becomes a significant achievement of his (and his mother's) reign.¹¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the enterprise was significant; on two occasions, some 145,000 people were levied to assist. Perhaps because Emperor Hui does not have his own basic annal, Sima Qian affords this important achievement only a minor mention in *Shiji* 9, instead spending the greater part of the annal focused on political machinations and fabrications to defame Empress Lü. The punishment of death for three sets of relatives, which Emperor Hui had planned to abolish, was carried out by his mother Empress Lü.¹¹⁰⁷ Such a progressive step away from final punishment with such broad scope would usually warrant praise.

The imperial court and the early Han Dynasty was a difficult political climate in which unpleasant decisions had to be made, and it appears Empress Lü made them. This is evident from the eventual downfall and purge of the Lü family.¹¹⁰⁸ It is likely one Liu emperor was replaced by another, albeit one without ties to the Lü clan, despite the assertion of Ban Gu that the young emperor was not in fact a son of Emperor Hui.¹¹⁰⁹ Once Empress Lü died, all members of her family in high positions were executed within months and 'all statutes and ordinances granting the Lü's privileges were immediately abolished'.¹¹¹⁰ Indeed, Emperor Guangwu later ordered the tablet of Empress Lü be removed from the Temple of Emperor Gaozu as a sign of disapproval.¹¹¹¹

Why this Presentation of Empress Lü?

Sima Qian faced a problem when organising his history; the two sons of Emperor Hui who reigned after their father's death were, by Sima Qian's time, seen as illegitimate. To give them each a book of their own with the title of emperor would have conferred legitimacy on

¹¹⁰⁴ Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge History*, p. 131.

¹¹⁰⁵ *HS* 2.3b; Dubs I, p. 179. *HS* 2.4b; Dubs I, p. 181. *HS* 2.5a; Dubs I, p. 181. *HS* 2.5b; Dubs I, p. 183.

¹¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* The wall is mentioned twice in *HS* 2.5b; Dubs I, p. 183.

¹¹⁰⁷ *HS* 3.2a; Dubs I, p. 192.

¹¹⁰⁸ *HS* 3.7b; Dubs I, p. 209. Psarras, 'The Political Climate of the Later Han', p. 25.

¹¹⁰⁹ *HS* 3.7b; Dubs I, pp. 209–10.

¹¹¹⁰ Li Xueqin and Xing Wen, 'New Light on the Early-Han Code: A Reappraisal of the Zhangjiashan Bamboo-slip Legal Texts', *AM*, 3rd ser., 14.1 (2001), p. 135.

¹¹¹¹ Yang, 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', p. 54.

them, and Sima Qian could not do this.¹¹¹² Omitting the two boy emperors thus created a gap in his history, which is arguably why Empress Lü was given her own chapter in the *Shiji*.

Sima Qian lived during the reign of Emperor Wu, who was a member of the Liu family that had ‘reasserted’ its power after Empress Lü’s death. This meant there was a need to maintain the current Emperor’s legitimacy by rejecting the legitimacy of the earlier two boy emperors—particularly as the second boy emperor, Liu Hong, was killed by the forebears of Emperor Wu so that Emperor Wen could take power. Sima Qian treads a delicate line; he outlines the political machinations of this period (and these reflect poorly on most of the participants), while toeing the official line that the Lü family took power that did not belong to them. As has been seen, the final commentary from Sima Qian indicates that the concerns of the imperial house and the fight for power did nothing for the ordinary people.¹¹¹³

It was alleged that Empress Lü took anonymous male children and substituted them as Emperor Hui’s sons. The purpose of this allegation was to assert that the boy emperors were illegitimate. Sima Qian seems divided regarding this allegation. First, he says that the Empress Zhang (wife of Emperor Hui) had no sons and so took children from the imperial harem and substituted them as her own.¹¹¹⁴ This is not that significant, considering they would still be sons of Emperor Hui. It is only later that Sima Qian implicates Empress Lü. He outlines that, after Empress Lü’s death, the high officials plotted together in secret saying that the young emperor and the Kings of Liang (梁王), Huaiyang (淮阳王) and Changshan (常山王) were not the true sons of Emperor Hui. As part of her plans, they claimed, Empress Lü took the children of other men, murdered their mothers, and had them brought up in the women’s quarters, pretending that they were sons of Emperor Hui. Then she had the emperor recognise them as his sons and set them up as heir apparent or as kings to strengthen the power of the Lü family.¹¹¹⁵

This suggests that, in fact, the allegation of child substitution was a political convenience for those who emerged victorious from the political turmoil following Empress Lü’s death. It also suggests that Sima Qian intentionally told his readers that it was a political convenience. The officials and the new emperor could not be seen to have killed a legitimate emperor, so

¹¹¹² Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 35.

¹¹¹³ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 284, Nienhauser II, p. 137.

¹¹¹⁴ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 273, Nienhauser II, p. 121.

¹¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

the story of the substituted children was created to legitimise their plot. The inclusion by Sima Qian, working during the reign of Emperor Wu, is a bold one. Such an inclusion may have been motivated by Sima Qian's negative stance regarding Emperor Wu.

The image of Empress Lü in the *Hanshu* and *Shiji* is complicated and affected by the political situation following her death. Her death was a problem because of the youth of the heir apparent, i.e. he could not rule alone as he was a child, and she had effectively been emperor. There was a military rebellion and a palace coup following her death.¹¹¹⁶ The boy emperor was disposed of and a new emperor installed. The murder of an emperor was a very serious business and for the sake of the legitimacy of new Emperor Wen, the lineage of the former boy emperor had to be discredited.¹¹¹⁷ Thus,

the victors painted a picture of wickedness of Empress Lü, and portrayed the rebellion as the legitimate reassertion of power by the Liu clan against the crimes of the imperial in-laws. It was also necessary to remove any stigma of usurpation from the new monarch, and so the previous two boy emperors had to be presented as 'non-emperors'. To this end, it was claimed that the Empress Dowager had stolen babies and installed them as emperors, because if they had been the real sons of Emperor Hui, this would have meant Emperor Wen was guilty of regicide. The accounts of the *Shiji* all serve this propaganda programme.¹¹¹⁸

Sima Qian comments that the story of the replacement of legitimate children (those of Emperor Hui) with illegitimate children was a plot of the high officials.¹¹¹⁹ This propaganda was not completely reflected by Ban Gu. He agrees with Sima Qian, saying the while first child did not issue from Emperor Hui's Empress Zhang (who had no children), it did come from the imperial harem and was thus still a child of Emperor Hui.¹¹²⁰ The only misdemeanour Ban Gu accuses Empress Lü of is taking the child of a concubine and pretending it was the child of the Empress Zhang.¹¹²¹ According to Ban Gu, when Empress

¹¹¹⁶ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 34.

¹¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹¹¹⁸ Ibid. *SJ* 130; Watson I, p. 267. Sima Qian outlines that he made the *Basic Annals of Empress Lü* because of the illegitimacy and usurpation of power of the Lü clan.

¹¹¹⁹ *SJ* 9; Watson I, p. 282, Nienhauser II, p. 134.

¹¹²⁰ *HS* 3.1b; Dubs I, p. 191.

¹¹²¹ Ibid.

Lü dismissed the first boy emperor the ministers all deferred to her judgment and told her they were undecided; as a result, she chose the new emperor.¹¹²²

The slightly different treatment of Empress Lü in this regard by Ban Gu and Sima Qian is a result of the *Hanshu* being compiled much later than the *Shiji* at a time when

there was considerably less reason for suppressing positive material about the Dowager [Empress Lü].¹¹²³

Ban Gu, living after the fall of the Xin Dynasty and seeing the re-establishment of Liu family power, was hardly concerned with whether Emperor Wen was legitimate and had been involved in the murder of the boy emperor. In this way Ban Gu, although writing much later may be more reliable, in that he had no real motivation to discredit Empress Lü and the boy emperors. A core problem, however, is that both sources suffer from lack of detail. Much of their history of Empress Lü focuses on the period after her death and the transition of power that followed, and accordingly they spend little time on her actual reign. In the *Shiji*, for example, more than one-third of the basic annals of Empress Lü cover this transition period.¹¹²⁴ It is also important to remember that Ban Gu may, despite being more distant in time from the reign of Empress Lü, have had access to a wealth of documentary material for the relevant period.¹¹²⁵

Admittedly, the death of Emperor Hui was a problem for Empress Lü. It is almost impossible for historians today to know whether the heirs she chose were legitimate sons of Emperor Hui. It would be strange, considering harem practices, if there were no offspring whatsoever. A new emperor was necessary and, in view of the importance of bloodlines as a source of legitimacy, Empress Lü would probably have chosen an actual child of Emperor Hui over a stranger, as this child would be her grandson by blood. The existence of the imperial harem system and the importance of bloodlines would suggest that she chose an actual son. In this way, she placed two sons of Emperor Hui (her grandsons) on the throne as Emperor,¹¹²⁶

¹¹²² *HS* 3.3b; Dubs I, p. 198.

¹¹²³ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 40.

¹¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹²⁵ Loewe, 'Ban Gu: Copyist, Creator and Critic', p. 342. Loewe highlights that Ban Gu provides a full account of a letter from Maodun to Empress Lü, whereas Sima Qian merely notes a letter was sent. *SJ* 110.2895 and *HS* 94A.3754.

¹¹²⁶ *SJ* 9; Watson I, pp. 273 and 272, n. 6.

although neither reigned for long—the first, Liu Gong, due to his untimely death and the second, Liu Hong, due to his removal by the conspirators following Empress Lü's death.

It is often difficult to understand and explain the presentation of Empress Lü. On the one hand she is a loyal and resourceful wife, on the other a ruthless mother and manipulator of the throne. The dichotomous treatment of Empress Lü becomes decipherable, however, when we consider Sima Qian the historian. Sima Qian, living in the reign of Emperor Wu, descendent of Emperor Wen, necessarily had to promulgate the unfavourable view of Empress Lü as the usurper of Liu family power. Political necessity influenced the work of the historian and this, combined with how easy it was to accentuate her cruelty, explains her misrepresentation. The dichotomous treatment can be understood considering Sima Qian's torn loyalties, political necessity and his dislike of Emperor Wu. Even though he had to toe the official line, he cleverly included different accounts of Empress Lü. He also suggested that the stories about the substitution of the boy emperors were later fabrications. Sima Qian is probably saying, as Markley suggests, that Empress Lü was cruel and evil but 'she still did a better job of ruling the country than Emperor Wu'.¹¹²⁷

Empress Lü was the famous first empress of the Han Dynasty and ruled in the manner of an emperor. Yet for some reason she does not merit a mention in Liu Xiang's text. Perhaps the reign of Empress Lü was simply too contentious, too political or too grand to be reduced to a minor outline within Liu Xiang's text. Despite this omission, Empress Lü was surely an important influence on Liu Xiang and why he felt a text such as the *Lienüzhuan* was desirable. Further, Empress Lü and the discourse around her predates and yet informs many of the themes we find in the *Lienüzhuan* and subsequent discourse regarding women. Women like Empress Lü were powerful; their power base was their role within the family and how that found expression within the state. As a result, their actions warranted attention, and at times censure, as the power of women and consort kin was subject to attack from officials and eunuchs.

¹¹²⁷ Markley, *Peace and Peril*, p. 42.

Conclusion

Imperial women in Han Dynasty China were high profile, politically active and held political power. The society and its political systems enabled female power. The importance of the family as a political unit, monarchical rule and the virtue of filial piety, in addition to centralisation of the empire and the accession of one emperor being predicated on the death of the previous emperor, all encouraged female power.

Families in the Han Dynasty imperial court were political entities. As a result, all family members were exposed to and part of politics. Imperial women had long been involved in the political sphere of their respective societies. The bloody unification process prior to the Han Dynasty increased imperial women's access to political arenas and their role as politicians. The rule of monarchs had already meant women were politically significant. As contributors to the imperial line and dynastic partners, they were vital to the political system and its survival. The sources reveal that imperial women worked within the system to ensure power for themselves, their children and their kin.

Filial piety was a vital virtue in the Han Dynasty. Respect for parental authority elevated mothers as the dynasty progressed. Elder female stateswomen benefited from the respect for parents and age-based power hierarchies. The importance of the family in a monarchical system enhanced the political significance of imperial women, namely empresses and empresses dowager. By the nature of their succession, emperors were left without a father but with a mother. Mothers, generally as empresses dowager, could be politically powerful. This had the practical effect of further enhancing maternal influence and the control maternal relatives could exert over politics, government and the emperor.

Han Dynasty imperial women (or maternal relatives') ambitions are often viewed as the cause of political turmoil. This no doubt corresponds to the high profile of women in the political system and the official Liu family history of the Han Dynasty. On occasion, women controlled the resources of a vast empire and held the power of life and death over a good portion of humanity. The power of empresses dowager at the beginning of the imperial system seems particularly great when compared with other periods of Chinese history. Some women in later eras were able to gain control of government but the statesmen of later dynasties learnt from the 'mistakes' of the Han Dynasty. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the extraordinary privileges of empresses dowager and their kin were presented as having progressively destabilised the Liu leadership, alienated the landed elite, and taken power out

of the hands of the bureaucracy. Unsurprisingly, the customs of later dynasties deliberately reduced female influence at court. It is no surprise then that both Liu Xiang's and Ban Zhao's work and their characterisation of women good and bad gained historical and cultural prominence.

The Han Dynasty is prominent as an extended period of intense female influence over the top echelons of government in the long history of China.¹¹²⁸ Most emperors owed their position directly or indirectly to female relatives or imperial women, rather than to imperial men. As a result, the centralised power and location of imperial women's families in the Han caused tension.¹¹²⁹ The importance of Han imperial women and consort families alienated bureaucratic circles, as the imperial system had deprived that class of political power. The imperial monopoly of political power and the influence of consort kin were used to male historians' advantage. Imperial women could be, and were, viewed as responsible for the chaos and terror that was an everyday part of the empire. Imperial women alone did not destabilise Han Dynasty China. Elements of the political system were inadequate, and a multiplicity of factors caused political change and decline. The political battle between consort kin and bureaucrats and eunuchs resulted in the depiction of consort women in unflattering terms. While Liu Xiang's texts seeks to constrain women and advise men on what virtues women should display, the work was ill suited to the competitive political environment of the imperial court. It is for this reason that within the Han Dynasty the text did not significantly curtail the actions of women within the imperial court.

Despite the power women held, their characters were maligned, manipulated and misrepresented by male historians. The position of powerful women, even when sanctioned, is often precarious in male-dominated societies. There was often a political motivation for discrediting women, and their gender often made them vulnerable to stereotyped attacks. The winners write history, it is often said, and, unfortunately, the power bases of many political women in the Han Dynasty eroded immediately following their deaths. Further, consort kin generally held power that the officials of the court, the class from which historians arose, coveted. As such, the depictions of consort women were often disparaging because of their political position and their gender. This is clear when we examine Empress

¹¹²⁸ Hinsch, *Women in Early China*, p. 160.

¹¹²⁹ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, p. 85.

Lü and the stern treatment some women receive in the *Lienüzhuan*. Male Han Dynasty sources use women to reflect badly on male peers; however, more commonly women are scapegoats, allowing blame to be diffused instead of placed on the emperor or calling into question whether an emperor, or a family, were 'legitimate' in their hold on power.

Female politicians as created by the male Han Dynasty historians are tools, just another part of their literary construction. Ultimately, it is not simply a matter of patriarchal oppression of women through history; it is far more complex. Imperial women were often criticised or presented in an unfavourable way for purely political reasons or narrative purposes. A patriarchal superstructure only made it easier to criticise them.

Ideas as to what being a woman meant arguably changed during the Han Dynasty, and with the *Lienüzhuan* and the *Nüjie* a pervasive conservatism regarding female familial and public roles emerged to regulate female agency. This ultimately resulted in inflexible standards to which women had to aspire. As always, a clever female operator within the Han Dynasty could manoeuvre her way through these strictures, attaining a standard of living, respect and some control over her own life. This is what Ban Zhao, with her *Nüjie*, provides. Human beings are subject to the rules and normative structures of their communities, societies and contexts. Although the Han Dynasty's literary and cultural milieu might seek to confine women, the political machinations of the imperial court proved somewhat immune.

This thesis's examination of Han imperial women has demonstrated that women held political and moral power within the family, the imperial court and, ultimately, the Han Dynasty system of government. This power was under attack. The centralisation of the empire, the monarchy-based leadership model and Han Dynasty views regarding filial piety enabled female power. However, as the dynasty aged and strengthened, power was sought by a variety of parties, including the officials and eunuchs. Much of the discourse regarding women became increasingly conservative to constrain female power based on blood or marital relationships. This was to the long-term disadvantage of imperial women and to the benefit of the officials and bureaucrats of the dynasty. It is clear the discourse of women is the outcome of a long-term power play within the management of the dynasty and its government.

Appendix - Timeline of Chinese Empresses

Western Han Dynasty

<i>Empress</i>	<i>Emperor</i>
Empress Lü 吕后 (died 180 BCE) r. 206–180 BCE (regent during Emperor Hui's rule) Lü Zhi 吕雉	Emperor Gaozu 高祖 r. 206 –195 BCE Emperor Hui 惠帝 r. 195–188 BCE
Empress Zhang 张后 (died 163 BCE) r. 192–188 BCE Known formally as Empress Xiaohui 孝惠皇后 Zhang Yan 张嫣	Emperor Hui
Empress Dou 竇皇后 (died 135 BCE) r. 179–157 BCE Known formally Empress Xiaowen 孝文皇后 Dou Yifang 竇漪房	Emperor Wen 文帝 r. 180–157 BCE
Empress Bo 薄皇后 (died 150 BCE) r. 157–151 BCE Bo Huanghou	Emperor Jing 景帝 r. 157–141 BCE
Empress Wang of Jin 孝景王皇后 (died 126 BCE) r. 150–126 BCE Wang Zhi 王姁	Emperor Jing
Empress Chen of Wu 孝武陳皇后 (died 110 BCE) r. 140–130 BCE Chen Jiao 陈娇	Emperor Wu 武帝 r. 141–87 BCE

<i>Empress</i>	<i>Emperor</i>
<p>Empress Wei 衛后 (died 91 BCE)</p> <p>r. 128–90 BCE</p> <p>Wei Zifu 卫子夫</p>	<p>Emperor Wu</p>
<p>Empress Shangguan 上官皇后 (died 37 BCE)</p> <p>r. 83–74 BCE</p>	<p>Emperor Zhao 昭帝</p> <p>r. 87–74 BCE</p>
<p>Empress Xu 許后 (died 71 BCE)</p> <p>r. 74–71 BCE</p> <p>Known formally as Empress Gong'ai 恭哀皇后</p> <p>Xu Pingjun 許平君</p>	<p>Emperor Xuan 宣帝</p> <p>r. 74–49 BCE</p>
<p>Empress Huo 霍后 (died 54 BCE)</p> <p>70–66 BCE</p> <p>Huo Chengjun 霍成君</p>	<p>Emperor Xuan</p>
<p>Empress Wang 王皇后 (died 16 BCE)</p> <p>r. 64–49 BCE</p> <p>Empress Xiaoxuan 孝宣皇后</p> <p>Jiang-Zeng Tai</p>	<p>Emperor Xuan</p>
<p>Empress Wang 皇后 (died 13 CE)</p> <p>r. 48–33 BCE</p> <p>Known formally as Empress Xiaoyuan 孝元皇后</p> <p>Wang Zhengjun 王政君</p>	<p>Emperor Yuan 元帝</p> <p>r. 49–33 BCE</p>
<p>Empress Xu 許皇后 (died 8 BCE)</p> <p>r. 31–18 BCE</p>	<p>Emperor Cheng 成帝</p> <p>r. 33–7 BCE</p>
<p>Empress Zhao 趙后 (died 1 CE)</p> <p>r. 16–7 BCE</p> <p>Known formally as Empress Xiaocheng 孝成皇后</p> <p>Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕</p>	<p>Emperor Cheng</p>

<i>Empress</i>	<i>Emperor</i>
Empress Fu 傅皇后 (died 1 CE) r. 6–1 BCE Known formally Empress Xiaoi 孝哀皇后	Emperor Ai 哀帝 r. 7–1 BCE
Empress Wang 王皇后 (died 23 CE) Known formally as Empress Xiaoping 孝平皇后	Emperor Ping 平帝 r. 1 BCE–6 CE
Xin Dynasty established by Wang Mang 王莽 6 CE –23 CE.	

Eastern Han Dynasty

<i>Empress</i>	<i>Emperor</i>
Empress Gou 郭后 (died 52 CE) r. 26–42 CE Guo Shengtong 郭聖通	Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 r. 25–57 CE
Empress Yin 陰后 (died 64 CE) r. 41–57 CE Known formally as Empress Guanglie 光烈皇后 Yin Lihua 陰麗華	Emperor Guangwu
Empress Ma 馬皇后 (died 79 CE) r. 60–75 CE	Emperor Ming 明帝 r. 57–75 CE
Empress Dou 竇皇后 (died 97 CE) r. 78–88 CE Known formally as Empress Zhangde 章德皇后	Emperor Zhang 章帝 r. 75–88 CE
Empress Yin 陰皇后 r. 96–102 CE	Emperor He 和帝 r. 88–106 CE

Empress Deng 鄧后 (died 121 CE) r. 102–106 CE Known formally as Empress Hexi 和熹皇后 Deng Sui 鄧綏	Emperor He
Empress Yan Jie 閭姬后 r. 108–125 CE Known formally as Empress Ansi 安思皇后	Emperor An 安帝 r. 106–125 CE
Empress Liang 梁后 r. 132–144 CE Known formally Empress Shunlie 順烈皇后 Liang Na 梁妠	Emperor Shun 順帝 r. 125–144 CE
Empress Liang 梁后 (died 159 CE) r. 147–159 CE Known formally as Empress Yixian 懿獻皇后 Liang Nüying 梁女瑩	Emperor Huan 桓帝 r. 146–168 CE
Empress Deng 鄧后 (died 165 CE) r. 159–165 CE Deng Mengnü 鄧猛女	Emperor Huan
Empress Dou Miao 竇妙后 (died 173 CE) r. 165–168 CE	Emperor Huan
Empress Song 宋皇后 (died 178 CE) r. 171–178 CE	Emperor Ling 靈帝 r. 168–189 CE
Empress He 何皇后 (died 189 CE) r. 181–189 CE Known formally known as Empress Lingsi 靈思皇后	Emperor Ling
Empress Fu 伏后 (died 214 CE) r. 195–215 CE Fu Shou 伏寿	Emperor Xian 獻帝 r. 189–220 CE

Empress Cao 曹后 (died 260 CE) r. 215–220 CE Cao Jie 曹节	Emperor Xian
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