

The Expectations for Women in Confucianism During the Chunqiu Period

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Abstract. Confucianism plays an important role in modern Chinese culture. Research have found the suppression of women in Confucianism and the role of women in Chunqiu. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about the relationship between early Confucianism in Chunqiu and women. Therefore, this study focuses on an overall description of the expectations for women of early Confucianism by examining the primary sources, such as *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, *Zuo Zhuan* and *The Book of Songs*, as well as existing research. The study finds that women were expected to be chaste, obedient, intellectual and righteous for the benefit of their husbands or of their states, sharing a lower social status. These expectations differ from reality, in which these traits were not regarded as important. Confucianism promotes the customary separation between two genders, in pursuit of courtesy for the social order. As for the limitations, this research has not deliberately distinguished the difference of expectations from Confucianism in Chunqiu and Han dynasty, leaving a gap for future research.

Keywords: Confucianism; Chinese women; Chunqiu.

1. Introduction

Today, society is experiencing the third wave of feminism, which sheds light on the often-overlooked role of women throughout history. Although women's individual impact may seem less notable than that of men, largely because of political, social, religious discrimination, their contributions should not be ignored. A daughter's marriage could enhance her family's social status, a mother would educate her children, and a peasant woman might contribute by cooking, weaving, and so on – these are the forgotten aspects of women's productivity. To be specific, the paper focuses on the Zhou dynasty, a period witnessed a change of the role of women. During this time, the work of men and women started to be simplified as planting grains and weaving cloths, and the reason behind the division of labor based on gender roles transferred from productivity need (since the Neolithic period) to more customary practices. Also, a new societal framework emerged in Zhou, linking men to the public sphere and women to the private one. These ideas were expressed through Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, and other philosophies [1].

Confucianism, which started in the Chunqiu Period, gained promotion during the Warring States period and remains a large component of Chinese culture today, continuing to influence contemporary thinking. For example, the idea of ren remains a central tenet. This raises a question: Confucianism was established in a specific historical background, but the society today is different from that of the past, so should its ideals be acknowledged and practiced today, or should it be reconsidered given the modern societal landscape? Therefore, it is important to study the Chunqiu period, when Confucianism was originated and laid the foundation for Confucianism's development. However, there are few studies that have directly linked Confucianism to women's roles. Existing research often focuses on individual women or describing the role of women in general without linking it to Confucianism, leaving a research gap in understanding the relationship between Confucianism and the role of women during the Chunqiu period [2].

This research relates the role for women to early Confucianism in the Chunqiu period, addressing this research gap. By analyzing primary sources such as *The Book of Songs*, *The Analects*, *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, as well as the existing research, this paper summarizes the social expectations Confucianism held for women during the Chunqiu period. These expectations include

familial relationships, production duties, physical and spiritual requirements, providing a wholesome description of the expected roles of women (both commoners and nobility) within Confucianism.

Understanding women's roles in the past can enrich the identity of future generations and provide insights into how far gender equality has come. In addition, studying the expectations of women in early Confucianism offers a deeper understanding of its message that Confucianism truly conveys and provides inspiration for creating a modern interpretation of women's roles nowadays, while maintaining culture inheritance in China.

2. Historical Context

During the Chunqiu period, the figure of women varied in reality, according to The Book of Songs. There were wives expressing their melancholy for their husbands' mistreatment, as seen in Mang and Bei Feng · Ri Yue; others express longing for their husbands who had left home for war, as in Zhou Nan · Ru Fen. Maidens yearn for love, either intensely as in Zhengfeng Qian Chang, or more reservedly, as in Zheng Feng Dong Men Zhi and Wang Feng Dache. Some women rejected to marry their rapists, as in Xing Lu, while others, like the mother with seven sons who still works hard, are depicted in Kai Feng [2]. Confucius stressed the importance of studying The Book of Songs to his apostles, deliberately accented the courtesy indicated by the poems within, and addressed some specific poems to elaborate on his opinions [3]. Also, in the Chunqiu-the historical record-women were perceived as a different category as opposed to men [4]. In addition, The Book of Change divided the world into Yin, weak, passive, hidden, which was connected to women, and Yang, which was connected to men: Chunqiu witnessed the transformation of gender separation whose purpose shifts from productivity to customary [5]. And in this separation, women faced gender inequality, as shown in The Book of Songs: An infant boy would be laid on the bed with jade to play with, whereas an infant girl would be laid on the floor with a tile to play with.

However, the expectations of Confucianism for women diverged from their actual roles. In *Zuo Zhuan*, which include comparatively few contents of them, women's figure could be divided into two categories: the good and evil-the author praised the former while abhorred the latter. The good, included women with righteousness, vision and bravery to fight against the unrighteous [6]; the evil included women with selfishness, adultery and murderous attempts [6].

However, women's role was subordinate to men's, considering examples like in the second year of Duke Zhuang of Lu. In *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, chastity, righteousness and intelligence were encouraged in women [7]. Although it was written in Han Dynasty, most of the stories within took place during Chunqiu period, hence offering us a peek into the expectations of Confucianism for women back in Chunqiu. Moreover, even Confucius himself debased women, as in *Analec*s, "it is not pleasing to have to do with women or people of base condition. If you show them too much affection, they become too excited, and if you keep them at a distance, they are full of resentment".

These opinions of women differed from the actual role's women played previously and at that time, also slightly differing from each other. Thus, this raised a question: what are the exact expectations of women in Confucianism in general, especially during the Chunqiu Period?

3. Expectations of Women in Confucianism during the Chunqiu Period

3.1. Chastity

Chastity was highly valued in Confucianism. While before and during Chunqiu, the idea of chastity wasn't held with such high regards or popularity. The Book of Songs included songs encompassing sexual intimacy of unmarried women or remarrying of divorced or widowed women, that indicated less customary separation between genders [1].

Under such circumstances, Confucianism, in which courtesy served as one of the main proposals, encouraged chastity in women. Chastity entailed loyalty to husband. Women weren't encouraged to leave their husband no matter in what circumstances. In *Biographies of exemplary women*, the Wife

of Cai refused her mother's offer to remarry, even when her husband was seriously sick. The Wife of Lizhuang refused to leave her husband for her sense of obligation of loyalty and chastity, even though their marriage was not happy, as people nowadays may perceive [6]. Furthermore, women who committed adultery, such as Sheng Meng Zi, were criticized in *Zuo Zhuan*, serving as an opposite example [8].

Not only under circumstances in which their husbands were alive, but also after their husbands' death, women were encouraged to stay chaste to her husband, without remarrying, even if she was widowed before the wedding. For instance, the Widow of Wei maintained her loyalty to her husband with moaning for three years and refusing to be "remarried", even after her husband-to-be died before her pedant chair entered his region [7].

In short, compared to men, who could have concubines and were encouraged to remarry for the sake of begetting sons to inherit his political status, women were expected to stay extremely loyal and chaste to her husband only, both when her husband was alive and when her husband died.

3.2. Obedience

Women had obligations known as "the three obedience": to obey her father, husband or son. However, to be generalized in a larger scale, her obedience extended to the courtesy, as "the three obedience" was founded on the pursuit of etiquette and rituals in Confucianism.

In *Biographies of exemplary women*, Zhao Nan Shen Nv refused to marry, because her husband had not prepared the wedding gifts as courtesy required. She was later condemned to the prison. As for extremity, in Bo Ji of Song's case, after being widowed, she refused to leave the house for etiquette reasons and died in the fire [7,9]. In Zhen Jiang of Chu's story, Zhen Jiang refused to leave the house, which was to be immediately flooded, because the messenger of the king, her husband had not brought the item that indicates the king's order, and she died in the flood [7]. Hence, it may be concluded that women were often encouraged to obey the courtesy, notwithstanding the high stakes as losing their lives.

3.3. Intelligence

Although there is a saying later on, "a woman without talents is a virtuous one", during the Chunqiu era, intelligence related to courtesy, truth, homage to the country and knowledge of superstition were promoted by Confucianism.

In *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, the Wife of Caoxi advised her husband to respect Chong Er, for she sensed Chong Er's succession to the throne, thus prospected her country. This is an example of praising women's sense of courtesy. In another case, Wife of Weiling, knowing that her husband was not to be deceived was deliberately praised. As Wife of Fanxian Zi, realized her youngest son's deceit, predicted her household's failure when this son's time came [7].

Thirdly, women needed to be loyal to the country. The daughter of a lowly family worried about her kingdom's future, because the king and his successor were both irresponsible, and her worry was realized in three years. Also, general Zhao Kuo's mother advised the king not to appoint her son to be in charge in the battlefield, since she knew his incapability. Alas, the king had not adopted her advice, leading to a terrible, famous defeat in the battle of Chang Ping [7]. Lastly, women had knowledge of the world-superstition as it seems today. Sun Shuao's mother wept, because her son killed a snake with two heads, which was regarded as a sign of prosperity [7].

It is to be noted that women in these cases all took a subordinate or passive role, such as giving advice or weeping. They were praised because their perception of the circumstance and their prophecies were later realized, but they did not actively made changes in these events, further indicating their reliance on men to make a difference. Also, one must bear in mind that intelligence was never equaled to literacy, meaning encouraging women to be wise does not equal to improving their education.

3.4. Righteousness

The righteousness of women was consistent with the proposals of Confucianism, while women's righteousness was more husband centered. For instance, Xuan Wang of Zhou's wife, knelt and begged for forgiveness in front of her husband in attempt to change his habits of being late for duty because he stayed with her. Fan Ji of King Zhuang of Chu stayed on diet as vegetarian until her husband stopped hunting too often and focused on politics. Wife of Yan Zi's Coachman advised her husband to be modest, which helped gain a promotion for both her husband and her. Jie Yu's wife of Chu advised her husband to be content as they remain poverty and follow the right path, without accepting the king's luxury to work for him [7].

Therefore, women were encouraged to be righteous: not to distract their husbands from their patriotic duty, to promote modesty, to encourage simplicity and avoiding waste. Women were expected to perform the obligation of keeping their husband on the right track, and they would be blamed had they failed, such as an idiom in Chinese, *hongyan huoshui*, meaning women became the cause of disaster.

4. Suggestions

Therefore, the question of whether Confucianism's proposals about women's role is to be aborted, or if not, to what extent we should promote it, is approaching the solution. Proposals like paying homage to the country and promoting intelligence should be kept, although women could participate more actively. Courtesy should be encouraged but must be restrained to a reasonable degree, keeping the balance between utilitarianism and morality. Extreme chastity, loyalty and obedience to male family members must be aborted, so as to approach gender equality [10].

Confucianism, a belief that has a dominant impact on Chinese culture, still affects our daily lives, both positively and negatively. In China, for example, there are less women in politics, and the average salary of women is lower. As Simone de Beauvoir said, a woman is first a woman before any other identity. Moreover, Confucianism, which customarily separated the two genders and put men in the dominant role, contributed to this phenomenon. Hence, adapting the same, good standards on men and women in Confucianism is a step towards gender equality.

5. Conclusion

The requirements and expectations of women in early Confucianism primarily include two parts. First, it consists of the proposals for men, such as ren (kindness), yi (righteousness), li (courtesy), zhi (intelligence), xin (trustworthiness). Second, it requires chastity and obedience of women to the country, her family, and her husband. Additionally, it regulates that women's life purpose should be centered on her husband.

Women shared a lower social status than men. On one hand, they were described as passive, hidden, weak, as in books like Books of Changes. On the other hand, they were presented as a wholesome figure, as in Books of Songs. Confucianism, somewhere in between, in pursuit of courtesy and customary order, in which men sow and plowed while women sewed and tended the household, expected women to be chaste, obedient, intellectual for the husband or country, and righteous, even to a suicidal extent. It is to be noted, however, that in Chunqiu, the expectation of Confucianism for women is not the reality.

In early Confucianism, women were debased, meaning the part involving gender inequality should be abolished, such as obedience to men, higher levels of chastity than men, and subordination to men. While Confucianism also entailed patriotism, righteous, courtesy (in a reasonable extent), these values would still apply to modern China, serving as a significant element in Chinese culture.

This research could fill the research gap in understanding the relationship between Confucianism and the role of women during the Chunqiu period. It would provide an overall view of women in early Confucianism from different historical sources. However, this does not draw a distinct line

between women depicted in sources from Chunqiu and in sources from Han that describes Chunqiu, especially Biographies of Exemplary Women, leaving the job of distinguishing the expectations of women in Chunqiu and Han dynasty a job for future research.

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