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## Technology, Commentary and the *Admonitions for Women*

By Sherin Wing<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The following is an analysis of the *Admonitions for Women* (*Nu Jie*) by the Later Han Dynasty scholar, Ban Zhao. It examines the historical context for its composition, applying not only one literary template, that of the instructional text, the technological treatise, but also Confucian Commentary. Through this process, the *Admonitions* emerges as a sophisticated philosophical tract that combines not only several literary traditions, but applies them to a new, unique audience: elite women. In so doing, Ban Zhao challenges assumptions of women's roles, expectations of women, and enlightens her readers as to what might be *really* happening among her contemporaries. Thus, this treatise comprises not only Ban Zhao's ideals for women, but indicates what they were not doing (hence the necessity for her tract). Finally, literary, philosophical and historical contextualization offers a new look at many gendered readings of the material, in effect *re-contextualizing* in a more nuanced and layered approach.

*Key Words:* Women in the Han Dynasty, Literary Analysis, Chinese Philosophy

### Introduction

“I, the unworthy writer, am unsophisticated, unenlightened, and by nature unintelligent, but I am fortunate both to have received not a little favor from my scholarly Father, and to have had a cultured mother and teachers upon whom to rely for a literary education as well as for training in good manners. More than forty years have passed since at the age of fourteen I took up the dustpan and the broom in the Cao family [her husband's family]. During this time with trembling heart I feared constantly that I might disgrace my parents, and that I might multiply difficulties for both the women and the men of my husband's family. Day and night I was distressed in heart, but I labored without confessing weariness. Now and hereafter, however, I know how to escape from such fears.”<sup>1</sup>

In this quotation, taken from a translation of the introduction to Ban Zhao's *Nu Jie* (hereafter *NJ*) or *Admonitions for Women*, we can see several assumptions and supposed inevitable social structures at work: there is an emphasis on servitude, avoidance of shame, and a distinct whiff of oppression. In fact, much analysis of women in the Later Han Dynasty (25-189 BCE) by Western scholars revolves around this assumption of already formulated oppression.<sup>2</sup> I would like to rectify this interpretation by adding certain contextual, rather than relying solely on translating the text. Instead I will situate this work in its contemporary context, between social, political and philosophical forces as they intersect with two literary genres. This will offer an alternative reading of this work and hopefully expand our understanding of elite Han women.

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Toward this end, I will examine the historical context of the Later Han Dynasty, addressing specific cosmological, philosophical, political and social concerns as they converged upon elite writers such as Ban Zhao. I will propose that this *trans-genre*<sup>3</sup> addresses the social roles of both women *and* men (because as we will see, men and women formed a complementary, rather than strictly hierarchical, unified construct) on several levels: as couples, members of a large kinship organization and by extension, important members of a community. Additionally, by combining two literary genres, the technical treatise<sup>4</sup> and commentary and directing this work towards a new audience—women—Ban Zhao created a *new* genre that would be reworked constantly throughout Chinese imperial history.<sup>5</sup>

After examining each of these areas, I hope to show how together they explain not simply how Ban Zhao chose her subject matter, but its presentational format, its legitimacy and finally, its audience. Contextualizing the *NJ* in history, philosophy and genre, will thus offer insights into not only Later Han society, but Ban Zhao herself that extend beyond a patrilineal, patrilocal or patriarchal reading of the text.<sup>6</sup>

### **Confucian Commentary**

Throughout the *NJ* there is a constant intersection of two literary traditions. Ban Zhao uses each alone and simultaneously to invoke literary and philosophical authority to justify the content of her work and its structure. In this section, we will see that Ban Zhao summons the authority of the Confucian Classics to support her subject matter: the techniques of a successful, elite woman as wife, daughter and mother.

If the technical treatise addresses the content of the work, then Confucian Commentary answers the question of its presentation. By invoking the scholarly authority of the Five Classics via literary commentary, Ban Zhao accomplishes two things: 1) she aligns herself with these authoritative figures, and 2) in so doing, ensures that her own writings will be viewed with similar authority.

To better understand the issue of legitimacy, however, we must evaluate the structure of philosophical commentary itself. Commentary's structure dictates its functions. Once determined, we will then discover how commentary builds credibility into its structure as well as how it invokes historical authority. Cabezon<sup>7</sup> and Gardener<sup>8</sup> have both compiled thorough lists detailing commentary's qualities and purposes. While I defer to the expertise of these scholars, I believe that there may be two additional characteristics which elucidate commentary's function as a literary genre and as a social tool. First, Confucian Commentary is created during a time of relative institutional stability.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, commentary is prescriptive, and the author, as "teacher," highlights the necessary issues and behaviors for the commentary's target audience. This element, though alluded to by many scholars, has yet to be formally addressed.

The necessity of commentary rises out of people's tendencies to do the opposite of what is prescribed, in keeping with pleasing both ancestral spirits and the spirits of the wind.<sup>10</sup> Repeatedly we find that in the Confucian canon, what has been prescribed by imperial philosophers points to the exact obverse of actual activity. By aligning itself with the canon, commentary adds its voice, further delineating those behaviors which will keep both ancestors, spirits, and one's patrilineal kin, satisfied.

### *Institutional Stability*

The literary characteristics of the Confucian canon are central to understanding social stability. It is important not to misread or essentialize this aspect as a literary trigger or as exclusive of institutional flux. Rather than approaching literary genre as singular and preclusive, it should be viewed as indicative of a social landscape incorporating individual elements which may conflict but also form a cohesive topos.

Therefore I propose that Confucian canonicity itself legitimized the beginning of a new ideology or institution. In so doing, it necessarily drew broader strokes for codes and regulations. Establishing and circumscribing the new institution from old ones, religious or secular, is a first-order task. In the Confucian tradition, the canon created a stable society based on strict social hierarchy. Specifically, these texts focused on the roles of ruler and nobility because these people possessed both power and right to construct social stability. Pragmatism dictated its ideology, notwithstanding the eloquence, with the focus trained on admonishing rulers towards lofty goals and *away* from infighting and war. Emphasis was on complementary hierarchies, yet ideological indoctrination was not an end in itself: it fostered political and military security. One constantly finds the Classics admonishing men to relinquish their personal power to a greater power: emperor and the society he protected.<sup>11</sup>

Successful philosophical indoctrination (demonstrated in this case by a peaceful state) results in institutional stability, a period within a given social institution that is not experiencing political upheaval, internally or externally. As such, the institution can be seen as occupying a temporal space dominated by ideological stability, if not stasis. And now the canon's meaning could be spread. No longer was the main audience primarily the ruler and his lord in turn. For commentary, the audience is enlarged to encompass not only social elites of the highest rank, but also local elites and officials who have direct contact with villagers.<sup>12</sup> This cannot be done, however, until a foundation of ideology has been established.

Commentary attempts to elaborate upon and in effect, craft a new philosophy based upon the older ideal. The next generation of philosophers and politicians were free to enact more specific policies for the general population. Therefore, while contemporary philosophers studied under an accepted set of proscriptions and ideals, they also initiated a period of transition which both reflected and restructured the contemporary landscape. The timeline for such a process is flexible, spanning tens or even hundreds of years,<sup>13</sup> a process which attempts to regulate behavior through canonical ideology, explicating or consolidating its meaning.

Ironically, although the audience itself might be enlarged, commentary narrows the philosophical lens, thus exerting a tighter control on the public. Commentary tightens the ideological spectrum by ultimately forging a *new* philosophy.<sup>14</sup> In this way, institutions were vulnerable to drastic transformations through commentary which claimed to "clarify" the canon. Commentary interprets the canon to strengthen and build the institution, even if this points the institution in a new direction. I am not proposing a commentarial trigger, however.<sup>15</sup> Rather, we must concentrate on the social landscape which produced the commentary. This topos was comprised of a stable society with a base ideology in attendance.

By creating a new philosophy, the commentators assigned institutionality to the canons themselves: they were established yet vulnerable to external and internal transformations. The social hierarchy was established and the highest social ranks of men knew and were

willing to accept their places. Thus, they were successfully indoctrinated by the Confucian canon. A crucial philosophical issue now was to maintain the social rankings, lest the subjects attempt rebellion. Confucian commentary was important because they responded to the base texts, clarifying and *further indoctrinating* their specified audience: the time had arrived for the lower elites to be taught their position.<sup>18</sup>

The Former Han provided Ban Zhao with the institutional and philosophical stability that allowed her to produce a second-order work of commentary. The Former Han philosophy focused on preventing a Qin redux by exhorting the nobility towards peaceful, obedient action. Ban Zhao and her Later Han counterparts refined this lofty yet vague ideology, by further specifying the conduct of a now peaceful and refined society.

Society, philosophically speaking, could now include other classes of men and women, as well. It is during prosperous times women could receive some philosophical attention as well.<sup>16</sup> Although women were always central to household organization, their duties were not addressed by philosophers concerned with unifying the state.<sup>17</sup> But a foundation had been laid, philosophically and in fact, allowing the philosopher's gaze to shift onto individual sectors responsible for maintaining society's strength and cohesion. Now that this was accomplished, women's responsibilities could be codified into a uniform set of guidelines. Those duties which were useful for men, which in turn supported the kinship organization.

Thus the Later Han Old Text Confucianists like Ban Zhao applied the Classics to local elites in their works because they *could*. The "luxury" of addressing local elite's and women's duties stemmed from the confidence that political and military battles that rended the state were not imminent. More time thus could be spent on these innumerable pillars of state.

### *Prescription*

If what I proposed thus far is accepted, then we must also acknowledge that commentary possesses an inherent prescriptivity. That is, commentary attempts to catalogue specific meanings within the classic text. By choosing a set of issues from the base text to discuss, the underlying assumption is that although a classic text may be complete and compact, it is not necessarily *clear*. Clarity in this instance reflects the issues chosen for elucidation in the commentary: the base text is not precise and obvious on the issues the commentator deems important.

Let's approach this methodically. First, if the canon is transparent and straightforward on the commentator's chosen issues, then the chosen audience would naturally enact the desired lofty precepts. It is because this audience does *not* automatically behave properly (subjectively defined as it is by the commentator) that necessitates commentary.<sup>18</sup> This does not undermine the comprehensiveness of the text. Rather, the base text is merely lacking the type of explication for dullards or perhaps simply a less well-read audience. Hence these ideas must be made accessible. It rests upon the commentator to make relevant the social ideology of the Classics (Black 1986: 109).

If commentary functions prescriptively, then the commentator herself becomes a teacher and leader of this newly-defined tradition. This locates the commentator on a higher level of understanding. Gardener has said that commentary was undertaken by a certain class, one that was educated and part of an elite minority who demonstrated their superiority by writing commentary.<sup>19</sup> I would amend this and propose that this not only

demonstrates intellectual superiority and cultivation, it is also only undertaken by a rarified member of the specified audience who has appointed herself as singularly capable of performing this task.<sup>20</sup> I would further suggest that a high moral stance is also implied in those writing commentary, that they would consider themselves *worthy* of writing such an important work, one that not only redefines ideology but also potentially, society itself.

Furthermore, because commentators possess knowledge, cultivation and morality to a rarified degree, *they themselves need not follow the guidelines laid out in their commentary*. They provide and teach the rules which will guide behavior for the best, both in social and individual terms. Again, this points to a new ideology based on canonical texts but dominated by issues the commentator chooses. Attributing final authority with the canon or classic effectively suppresses any doubt to legitimacy or validity of the revised ideology.

We must also consider the audience for commentary: whom was it directed towards? Again, I shall propose several aspects regarding the issue of audience. First, commentary is audience-specific: it is not directed at all literate individuals, just those who require the guidance contained *in* the treatise. Secondly, as suggested above, the audience likely shares the same gender and/or class. Moreover, these readers were the commentator's contemporaries. That any commentator believes her own work is pan-historical and transcends both class and gender boundaries do not make it so. Finally, the commentator invariably addresses contemporary issues remedied through a correct (read: new) reading of canonical material which always reflects contemporary values.

Commentary's prescription, however, varied according to its literary style. For instance, the lecture-style commentary described by Roy<sup>21</sup> interrupted the canon with its own views, opinions and questions. This style fit commentary for and by women because the canonical texts themselves addressed them so seldom. Rather than dissect a work line by line, these writers necessarily acquired a more flexible and interactive approach to their material. Although Roy asserts that lecture-style commentary is a later development within scholasticism, again this seems to depend upon the genre and base-texts the commentator is working with and within. For Ban Zhao, the Classics offered very few direct exhortations for women. Left with this dearth of base material, it is reasonable to surmise that the only course of academic interaction left *is* to converse with the text in a dialogical manner, rather than choosing large sections of the canon to explicate in detail.

## **Technology**

The construction of self is crucial to our understanding of Ban Zhao's purpose in the *Nj* and the importance of the technical treatise as a genre. As an instructional text then, the *NJ* provides a series of techniques centered around harmonious and effective living. In prior scholarly investigations, the *NJ* has been categorized as an instructional manual.<sup>22</sup> A treatise's definition, as well as its function, lies in the interaction between human activity and matter to produce a result (physical or abstract) meaningful to humans.<sup>23</sup> the technical treatise implies instruction, but it contextualizes this instruction in a larger social sphere, determining not only issues of the work's content, but its literary pedigree as well. As a technical treatise, we can examine the *NJ*'s structure within an established form and extract further clues as to its meaning, intent and possible impact.

But let's first examine the role of self during the Later Han. Quite simply, the self was constructed solely through relationships—there was no inherent essence which

transcended roles. Rather, a person was an amalgam of social roles.<sup>24</sup> The issue of self, then, a *successful* self, revolves intimately around the proper engagement in social behaviors. Additional beliefs in winds, cosmology and the capriciousness of their favor based on proper or improper actions were also in full force at this time.<sup>25</sup>

Precisely because self is defined in terms of ritual behavior in concert with others, proper enactment is paramount. Appropriate conduct does not refer to political or economic consequences, as it may have done in the conduct manuals found in Western Europe which coincided with the imperial contest.<sup>26</sup> Domesticity and its proper guidance in Europe was effort to cordon middle-class women and their “pretensions” to upper class leisure, simultaneously functioning as an economic tool to control women’s potential economic potential.<sup>27</sup> These issues were then expanded upon when European women began replacing concubines in the colonies to bolster the colonial expansion and secure hegemony over those being colonized.<sup>28</sup>

During the Han however, women were defined through their behavior. “Woman” was not a transcendent essence. A woman could enact “protocols of masculinity” and thereby produce a body, hence a definition of self, as male.<sup>29</sup> As one scholar says, “identity...is shifting and contextual, denoting a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically sets of determinant relations.”<sup>30</sup> What this means is that womanhood itself could not be taken for granted, and that within the context of traditional roles authorized by history, there was still much that was left undetermined. Performed incorrectly, one could jeopardize one’s very identity, as well as the fortunes of many.<sup>31</sup> For this reason an instructional guide was necessary.

What, however, was the underlying preoccupation that demanded such instruction. I would argue that proper conduct, by either men or women, ensured that the very cosmos remained aligned, and that favor visited not only the immediate family, but the community, as well.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, uterine and patrilineal ties were central to this ideology. Improper activity could anger the spirits, the winds, the cosmos, and thus a single person could change the fortune of an entire village. It was this belief, rather than the attempt to redefine, circumscribe or project onto women political and economic instability. Economics and politics are implicated only insofar as upsetting the cosmological balance through improper behavior may negatively affect the larger community. What we are discussing, then, is that conduct *determines* fate.

Finally, since woman was not a pre-constituted category socially encoded roles not only defined her as a woman, but her class, her purpose, her very self. We are not looking at a more *preferable* production of Woman, but solely at *a* production of woman in *relation* to other people. This is the crux, I believe, behind the *NJ* as a technical treatise.

Therefore the *NJ* focuses on specific techniques to proper ritualized conduct situated *within* relationships not merely to servants and as servants, but to all those a woman may have contact with. The goal is to foster harmonious relationships, which in turn will perpetuate good fortune for the entire kinship system and beyond. Thus, inscribing the body with a range of techniques not only inscribes a definition of “self” but it also ensures that the very cosmos will remain aligned and thus interact favorably not only with oneself, but ones extended family.

As a technical treatise, then, technology, then, occupies a central role in the production of social meaning, resulting from the interaction of more than one technique at a given moment.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as a burgeoning genre during the Han, Ban Zhao’s

appropriation is all the more significant, since in doing so, she forges a *new* genre: the technical treatise for *women*.

### *Components of the Technical Treatise*

We must quantify certain factors of the technology, however, to fully comprehend the nuances of the technical treatise. Four factors will be explored here: 1) the goals sought, 2) mode of performance, i.e. individual or collective, 3) social meaning, and 4) performance schedule.

I would go further to add that these techniques can be seen as daily *rituals* and as such, are the very substance of producing and negotiating power in relationships.<sup>34</sup> Technology subsumes the category of ritual because rituals, by their very definition, are a type of technique, performed in a specific manner, designed to achieve a specific goal.<sup>35</sup> Much work has been done on religious rituals, to decode what rituals are, how they function and to what ultimate purpose they serve humans on an emotional and psychological level.<sup>36</sup>

Secular technologies are performed, especially as they are presented in the *NJ*, for daily use. These techniques are also a solitary endeavor that preclude any collective effort, although a goal might result in social interaction with many. Absent from this is any religious, often transcendental, goal, replaced instead with modes of behavior which address common, often mundane situations. These goals, moreover, can be either intangible or material. Literacy offers an example of the former and a harmonious relationship an example of the latter, including fostering harmonious relations, producing household work in the most efficient manner, and being a pleasant, efficient and effective woman overall.

The social relevance or meaning of a technology derives from its author: that person or institution promoting it. In the *NJ*'s case, the author is Ban Zhao, and it is she who imparts their social value. Yet if technology does occupy a central role in the formation of social meaning, as Bray has proposed,<sup>37</sup> then that cannot simply derive from one person's or institution's opinions. Rather, we are given meaning arising out of a matrix of techniques in any given moment (*ibid*). this value, then, comes not only from the author(s), but from the individuals performing them, layering their own values and scripts upon the socially accepted valuation.

The issue of performance schedule is of course central to any technology, religious or secular. They can be performed on a wide variance of schedules: weekly, monthly and yearly. The frequency of the technology is determined by the goal, and in the case of the *NJ* as a secular technology, it forges a new literary genre combining commentary and techniques to propose a set of womanly technologies, performed daily, which will ensure the success of her position as a married woman.

### **Ban Zhao in the Later Han**

Thus far, three basic propositions have been presented: 1) the *NJ* is a technical treatise which imparts a set of skills Ban Zhao deemed imperative to elite woman in large kinship organizations, 2) the *NJ* is a work of commentary which engages the Confucian Classics to justify the rules put forth in the *NJ*, and 3) commentary is a prescriptive, hence, audience-specific work. These components reflect the commentator's values and as such are dictated by the commentator's class and gender, situated historically.



Given these propositions, we must turn to Ban Zhao's own biography to further understand the *NJ*. Education, social standing, the *fact* of an author's gender, philosophical trends, even spatial location of the author, all these factors temporally contextualized can go far in explaining not only the *NJ* but many literary works, as well as institutional movements, both religious and secular.<sup>38</sup> I will also explore Ban Zhao's *conception* or her audience.<sup>39</sup> This includes how she understood elite women, based on her own education and philosophy.

### *The Social Topos*

There has been much scholarly evidence for the social and economic prosperity of the Later Han, so I will instead examine the literary indicators of stability. These lie in the types of works produced by eminent scholars of the Later Han. For contrast we can see the dominant themes of such Former Han works as the *Zhanguo Ce* (戰國策 *The Strategems of the Warring States*) and the *Guo Yu* (國語 *Discourses of the States*) to name a few focusing on the roles of noblemen who could help shape a nation or effect its demise. Women, if portrayed at all, were agents of destruction or minor supporters in contests for power.

During the Later Han, however, scholars began concentrating on philosophical justifications for moral rectitude that would lead to continued prosperity, peace, structure and obedience. In a form of criticism towards their Former Han forbears, the Later Han Confucianists transferred their attention from the nobility to the local elites who would form the backbone of social stabilization. After all, it is well and good to indoctrinate the upper classes, but if the lower classes are unaware of their roles, an internal threat looms large. Ban Zhao wrote during peacetime and we will see that her writing reflects that she sought to perpetuate this state of affairs in the social arena, by indoctrinating, amongst others, elite women.

Hence beginning with the *Hou Han Shu* or *History of the Later Han*, the first edition of the *Lienu Zhuan* (*The Collected Lives of Women*, hereafter *LNZ*) was included in the dynastic history. The subject matter is unique not simply because they were exemplary stories, but because they were *women's* stories. Prior to this, the major subject matter was men, their examples of right and wrong behavior and the consequences of these actions. This new work indicates an awareness that 1) women were equally important to continued stability of the community, and 2) there was *time* to write about women because the political state was not in jeopardy. This signals an important ideological shift, *away* from basic foundation building and towards refinement of principals and behavior. That is, if a dynastic history can symbolize the official ideology, and sanctioned by the state's ruler can include women's stories, clearly a fundamental change has occurred in what is deemed worthwhile recording.

An important literary indicator of the political climate lies in the emperor's choice to complete the era's most important literary tome: the *Hou Han Shu* (*History of the Later Han*, hereafter *HHS*): a woman, Ban Zhao. I would further argue that Ban Zhao herself embodies a successfully peaceful social structure. She hailed from an eminent scholarly lineage which included her brother, Ban Gu, the author of the official history, the *HHS*. His role as a valued advisor to the Emperor surely favorably positioned Ban Zhao in the Emperor's eyes, as well.

This is not to discount the value of her advice. Ban Zhao was consulted in matters of politics, family, and as a personal advisor for the Empress. Yet the most remarkable

feature of her accomplishment lies not simply in the *fact* of them, but rather in the *climate* in which they were achieved. It is no coincidence that prior dynasties had no counterparts to Ban Zhao. Accomplished and intelligent women such as Empress Lü were well respected by scholars and rulers alike. But there were no instances of women not of royal blood earning positions comparable to Ban Zhao. Ban Zhao's contemporaries sought advice and honored her because they could. Thus although an individual like Ban Zhao may possess characteristics of greatness, they are mobilized by environmental factors: political climate, economic prosperity, geographical location, and social status. Within a hostile social, economic and political environment, it is unlikely Ban Zhao would have been offered the opportunities she received.

Yet while the *LNZ* provided biographies of ideal and idealized women, a comprehensive regulatory code was still lacking. Such important institutions as marriage, motherhood, and housekeeping had yet to be codified.<sup>40</sup> For example, marriage alliances were at various times refused, chosen, and even dissolved by women. Divorce was also not regulated, nor was remarriage. To ensure that the state could rely on its subjects, these types of activities had to be more predictable.

Ban Zhao filled this void by interpreting among other classics, the *Li Ji* (*Book of Rites*, hereafter *LJ*) and the *Shiji* (*Book of History*, hereafter *SJ*). She encoded women's roles, expectations and conduct, authorized by the Confucian canon, and based on the premise that marriage was a central element in the construction of a stable social order: together, through an interdependent relationship, men and women would create a secure base upon which the state could rely. Thus women would maintain a properly run household while men sought economic and political success outside the home. By promoting an interwoven system of social hierarchy, Ban Zhao could actively foster internal security on several levels: household, community and state.

### **Ban Zhao's Concept of Women**

Despite innovations in both philosophy and action, certain rules of conduct remained unaddressed, hence static: those of women. The *LNZ* provides a good first effort, yet it was after all only a single series. And while many scholars have decoded the Classical views and roles of women, they bear reiterating here so that we may understand exactly what Ban Zhao was responding to, i.e. how and why she chose her subject matter. Recall, too, that although the Classics did discuss women, it was infrequently, and in the most general terms. The specific duties were often implied and hence the opportunity to clarify and regulate through commentary was available.

Central to the *NJ* is the concept of *san gang* or the Three Bonds which collectively comprise the foundation for a stable society: Lord:Subject, Father:Son, and Husband:Wife. These bonds imply an interdependent hierarchy which, if maintained, ensures a progressive and yet secure society. Presumably these hierarchies preclude challenges to the authoritative figure in these dyadic structures.<sup>41</sup>

Any lingering questions regarding the centrality of an interdependent hierarchy are dispelled as the *yin-yang* (concept fixes it at society's center. *Yin-yang* does not merely exemplify the relationship between men and women, however, it is used (in fact, I would argue its primary use) to re-emphasize the corresponding relationships between men of different classes. It is "the yang power of initiation" complemented by the "yin power of completion."<sup>42</sup> Essential to *yin-yang* theory are the complementary concepts of activation

and reception.<sup>43</sup> That is, the *yang* principal manifests in a given relationship as an activation, a creative force. It initiates and creates a given situation. The *yin* force receives the information and responds accordingly.<sup>44</sup>

Recall that receptivity and response are *equal* partners in the formula.<sup>45</sup> Therefore a ruler is *yang* to a subject's *yin*, a father is *yang*, a son *yin*, a husband, *yang*, a wife, *yin*. The emphasis is not on women as subservient (as has often been portrayed in western scholarship) but rather on *the interdependent order of social relationships functioning according to a natural hierarchy*.<sup>46</sup>

Added to this was the belief that every person held a role in the social structure and that these were specifically ordered. The socio-political system worked only if people maintained their proper positions in relation to each other, and enacted the appropriate protocols in those positions, lest chaos ensue. In fact, each of these beliefs, the Three Bonds, *yin/yang*, the winds and cosmology and ancestor worship converge on the axis of clearly defined complementary hierarchy as the antidote for military and political chaos.

It is true the Classics did not specify numerous positive models for women. Some were praised as invaluable advisors, remonstrating with their husbands and sons,<sup>47</sup> others formed politically motivated marriage alliances in service of other men. Women also used their sexuality to infiltrate rival families. Women often maintained a stable home front so that the men in their lives could pursue *their* goals outside the home.<sup>48</sup> Yet while most entries express fear of what women *might* do if improperly regulated, there were no guidelines for what women *should* do outside of being generally chaste, devoted and ritually responsible. This is precisely the venue for a commentarial work: as a second-order text codifying general principles put forth in the canon. Rather than diffusing power on such erstwhile endeavors, women needed guidance for proper conduct.<sup>49</sup> Who better to provide such guidance than an educated, well-connected woman such as Ban Zhao?

By examining her work, the *NJ*, we find that Ban Zhao addresses these very issues of misguided agency, replacing them with qualities such as steadfastness, discretion, and forbearance. While these issues were exemplified in the *LNZ*, to which Ban Zhao indirectly refers, this new work is a technological pamphlet which focuses on the acquisition of useful, harmonious and effective behaviors for daily living.<sup>50</sup>

### *Audience*

Although no proof is available regarding Ban Zhao's intended audience, through an elimination process it will be clear that they were elite women. I will extrapolate this based on four issues: 1) the introduction of the *NJ* references her daughters, elite women themselves, 2) the issue of literacy, which focused on elite men and women, 3) the relevancy of the material, and 4) her language, which remained unswayed by the grandiloquent style of elite ideology, opting instead for a succinct, linear approach to its technology.

The introduction professes that Ban Zhao wrote this for her daughters, and while they were already married at this time, I do not believe that we can completely dismiss this assertion. Namely, it provides a convenient premise for instructing women just like them: elite, educated women.

One suggestion is that Ban Zhao's intended audience was men, primarily based on the issue of literacy. Quite simply, literate men dominated the population. Thus she may have simply been writing for the majority reading audience. Logically, however, it is

difficult to presume that Ban Zhao would detail such specific techniques simply for the male reading population, for they are clearly directed at women. As Holmgren shows, literacy was taught to both girls and boys.<sup>51</sup>

The *NJ* can also be seen as a literary proving ground. The type of work, an intersection of technological and commentarial genres, incisively demonstrates literary skill exercised most often by men. Indeed to engage in such a literary endeavor for women *as* a woman certainly challenged and transcended socially-defined gender limitations. In producing such a work, surely Ban Zhao's status was certainly raised. The *NJ* offered an opportunity to stretch her intellectual and writing skills in a way the *HHS* could not and in so doing, might well have cemented her reputation amongst her intellectual contemporaries.

The subject might also provide an opportunity for self-aggrandizement. In regulating women's activities, Ban Zhao preempts any men contemplating a similar undertaking, establishing herself as the authoritative voice. Her uniquely sophisticated approach and style are so well crafted as to silence any detractors or competitors. In a sense, Ban Zhao performs this job better than any man might, and in so doing, legitimizes herself within her circle of scholars and pundits. Yet it remains unsupported that they were her only intended audience.

Finally, the presentation of the treatise's content is neither lofty, elliptical, nor couched in grand imagery. Instead it is a straightforward tract, designed to impart useful skills in the course of a woman's married life. In fact, the language is far from literary in any aesthetic sense, a characterization which further argues for the utilitarian nature of the tract, aimed at women. Each section is entitled in a concise manner, almost as if to allow easy reference to certain areas of a woman's duties. If we accept, then, that women were indeed her primary audience, the question arises: what social class of women? This is an issue which will bear further investigation elsewhere.<sup>52</sup>

### **Instructions for Women**

The basic structure of the *NJ* is as follows: seven sections, each devoted to a single topic. Within each section, quotes and references to the Classics lend authority to the techniques outlined. Oftentimes, they provide the underlying rationale, other times, they offer legitimacy. Ban Zhao concludes each segment with concrete techniques to attain the desired situations accompanied by final ideological reminders.

The seven sections are

1. Modest and Yielding
2. Husband and Wife
3. Reverence and Caution
4. Woman's Conduct
5. Fixed Attention
6. Obedience
7. Harmony with Younger Brothers and Sisters (in-laws)

As I will demonstrate, these sections contain an overall structure that moves beyond a mere amalgam of techniques. Each category not only elucidates qualities a proper woman should propose but also represents a progression, from her roles as daughter, then wife, daughter-in-law, then sister-in-law. The movement advances from

biologically-determined roles to socially-dictated roles. Furthermore, these classifications mimic a woman's own social progression through these socially prescribed stages.

The first section, "Humble and Yielding," refers to woman's role from birth to her preparation for marriage. The symbolism of her playthings, and her physical location as an infant signify several things: 1) those responsibilities she will perform, 2) the characteristics required to perform those duties effectively, and 3) her destiny for marriage. By establishing this sequence, Ban Zhao demonstrates a woman's training from almost the beginning of her life for her destiny as wife. Each action, each object, acquires a symbolic function which prepares her for this role.

In support of these contentions, Ban Zhao invokes the *Shi Jing (Book of Poetry)*: it not only provide authority for Ban Zhao's own contentions, but also lends structure to her presentation of techniques. Hence, she begins her work by paraphrasing the *SJ*:

"In olden days when a girl was born, on the third day she was laid on the floor below the bed, given a spindle to play with, and her parents commemorated her birth and made an offering to their ancestors. She was laid on the floor below the bed to clarify her modest and yielding lot, as well as her subservience to others. The tile illustrates both her destiny for labour and that she should be focused on working diligently. Finally, having her birth commemorating to her ancestors signifies her duty in performing ancestral rites. These three duties comprise the constant principles of a woman's life. This is what is taught by rites and regulations." (84: 2787).

There are several unique elements in this initial passage. First, Ban Zhao uses the *SJ* quote to narrow her focus, designating specific social expectations and duties symbolized by both toys and rituals. No such prescriptions are found in the original passage,<sup>53</sup> comprised of general exhortations for her to be quiet and helpful.

Hence diligence includes a work schedule from dawn to dusk of any and all tasks, performed without complaint. To fulfill one's modest and yielding lot precludes laughter and joking; a woman must opt for quiet repose. Her demeanor does not draw censure or unnecessary attention which would detract from both the duties and her performance of them (i.e. her effectiveness). As for the ancestral sacrifices, again we see that even infant girl's are prepared for the eventuality of marriage: her birth report itself symbolize the very same ritual she will perform for her husband's ancestors.

Here is the first example of commentary. Ban Zhao expands and clarifies the text, and in so doing, imparts additional meanings not originally intended. In fact, the original intent of the canon's author/compiler is rendered irrelevant: authorizing the commentary and structuring the techniques outlined by the commentator become the focus. Ban Zhao utilizes the canonical text as a structuring agent of her content, while simultaneously invoking its authority. Hence the spindle, which might simply have remained a convenient and simple toy, now symbolizes diligence and in addition it indicates the type of work: diligence in *household* work. That a woman will be hard-working, modest and reverent of ancestors, these specific techniques of effective daily living are determined by the *SJ*: in one respect, the canonical text provided a shortcut for Ban Zhao in determining her subject matter. She continues,

“As for being solicitous, this is defined as being humble and yielding in serving others. To retire to bed late and rise early to work, to not shrink from work from dawn to dark; to retain fixed attention on one’s own affairs and not complain of difficult and easy tasks, this is what must be done. And to this manual labor, be neat and orderly, defined as being steadfast and diligent. One must have a serious and dignified countenance so that when serving one’s husband, one is not given to laughter or jest. To provide food and drink in a proper manner for one’s husband’s ancestors, this is defined as maintaining the ancestral rites. If these three qualities are perfected, then one’s name will not be sullied and dishonour will not be visited upon one. If these three qualities are lacking, oh, what name will one have and what dishonour will one experience!” (ibid).

The specificity of these techniques, a woman’s demeanor towards her husband, her willingness to work, even the type of speech she engages in, must be understood in the philosophical context of the Han. It is necessary to perform these tasks just so, lest an incorrect behavior invoke unfavorable results which extend beyond immediate social ramifications. Instead, an erroneous production of social conduct, for instance, might result in disastrous fortunes wrought on the entire family. As Zito says, there are “no fixed boundaries between the internal self and the external world.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, one is unified with the external world in a way that implicates all one’s movements as directly relevant to one’s fortunes.

Section two, “Husband and Wife,” together with the third section, “Reverence and Caution,” form the transition from general womanly goals to specific marital strategies. “Husband and Wife” establishes marriage as a natural convergence between cosmic forces, *yin-yang* the most prominent among them. Marriage is the ultimate goal for women. In this section, both the *SJ* and *LJ* are specifically used:

“The Way of husband and wife is the ideal blend of *yin* and *yang*. The husband can penetrate the way of the gods. He trusts in the exalted principles of Heaven and Earth and the great order of human relationships. This is used by the *Book of Rites* to honour the boundary between the sexes, while the *Book of Poetry* is concerned with right conduct (in marriage),” (84: 2788).

The commentarial template offers Ban Zhao a literary strategy to impart her recommended techniques: she cites two canonical texts and then defines their meaning. Immediately following is an explanation of how men properly guide their wives, fulfilling their responsibility in the order of human relations. Yet a man is formally trained in these rules of conduct, he is not taught symbolically (through playthings), but with a strict education.

In response, a woman must likewise receive formal training, not simply with symbols laden with encoded meanings, but as men are taught. It is not surprising then that Ban Zhao recommends literacy as a central technique for the success of women: men must do for their daughters what they do for their sons to ensure that the cosmic convergence called marriage occurs:

“In regards to gentlemen, they only know that their wives must be guided and that their own dignity and sense of decorum must be maintained. Thus they instruct their sons, utilizing the classical texts to regulate them (according to these principles). Yet they truly do not understand that husbands must also be served (by their wives)<sup>55</sup> and that the Rites and Regulations must be preserved (by their wives, as well). Yet they instruct only their sons but do not also instruct their daughters (in their duties). Is this not also deceptive? In this regard, a gentleman should be reprimanded. In the *Book of Rites* it is said boys are taught to read and at fifteen they are sent to school. Girls should be taught in accordance with this model as well,” (84: 2788).

As we can see, this last proposal is a clear deviation from the original text, demonstrating that the canon legitimizes *new* ideology, rather than reiterating old ideology. By appropriating elements which recall the past, Ban Zhao is able to institute a new tradition.<sup>56</sup> Hence Ban Zhao invokes an old, established ideology, embedded in an accepted set of values (ibid) to create a new role for men: actively educating their daughters. Literacy will aid their daughters in understanding the established principles of marriage which promote an interdependent, hierarchical relationship. An uneducated woman will be unable to fulfill her duties. Ban Zhao chastises men for not realizing that just as they *learned* their duties through extensive education that women, as well, require similar education to achieve a full understanding of their responsibilities.

An additional point is that this clearly rejects the notion of Ban Zhao’s “sexism.” Instead, she opts for practicality, and doesn’t draw distinctions between the sexes where education is concerned. What’s more, as Holmgren has shown, there was neither distinction between the sexes in education or reading material.<sup>57</sup> She further demonstrates that this misconception has arisen out of a conflation of opinions by such scholars as Van Gulik and should be read with caution at the very least.

Although section three, “Reverence and Caution,” contains no examples of dialogical commentary elements, Ban Zhao continues to philosophically promote the inevitability of marriage. In this section, she moves from the successful pre-marriage training to the justification of marriage itself as the sustaining goal of society. Hence Ban Zhao produces an argument for marriage based on biology and the *yin-yang* theory of interdependent relations.

Based on the inherent differences in men and women, drawn on *yin-yang* lines, Ban Zhao then catalogs the skills women require to skillfully negotiate both their relationship with men, as well as men themselves. The result is a manifestation of man’s higher qualities. Mishandling this relationship ends in quarrels and abuse. According to this theory, men and women are biologically different, yet those physical characteristics and concomitant qualities are complementary, hence the necessity of marriage. Upon this fundamental block is built the successively larger interdependent, hierarchical relationships of society, including Father:Son and Ruler:Subject.

Viewed together, we can see that sections two and three form a cohesive unit of pre-marital training. The training is less explicit instructions for the woman, as it is an indoctrination of the necessity of marriage. It parallels the instructions a mother might

offer her daughter(s), but on a larger scale, and with a degree of uniformity heretofore unseen. Moreover, these two sections function as transitions: once we have understood that a woman is born into her fate and that she will serve people in various capacities according to her destiny as a married woman, then we can turn to the techniques on how best to fulfill this capacity.

It is thus that section four, “Womanly Conduct” begins by providing a general model of a great woman:

“There are four types of womanly conduct: the first is called womanly virtue; the second is womanly speech, the third is called womanly comportment and the fourth is womanly skills. As the master said (according to the *LiJi*), ‘In regards to womanly virtues, it is not necessary for her intellectual abilities to be extraordinarily unique; as for her speech, it is not necessary for her to be eloquent or incisive; in regards to her comportment, it is not necessary for her countenance to be beautiful or superior; and as to her skills, it is not necessary for them to surpass others,’” (84:2789).

Ban Zhao elaborates upon these initial instructions, in effect, producing commentary on them, codifying them according to her own values and in so doing, fixing the techniques necessary. She thus continues:

“For a woman to be reserved and modest and to observe restraint and order (in her conduct), whose conduct does not invite censure, and whose deportment follows the regulations, this is womanly virtue. To choose her words carefully, not engaging in foul speech, and to speak only at appropriate times, not boring others with (unnecessary) words, this is womanly speech. A woman who washes away the dirt from herself, whose clothing is not gaudily adorned, who bathes consistently so her body is neither dirty nor defiled, this is womanly comportment. To be solely fixed on spinning thread, rejecting jesting or laughter, and to be orderly in serving guests food and wine, these are womanly skills. Together, these four sections comprise the great virtues of a woman and she must not be found wanting in any of these,” (88:2790).

As we can see, Ban Zhao has elaborated considerably upon the initial categories of womanly virtue, speech, comportment and skills. This foray into domestic technological commentary clearly provides a new interpretation of these characteristics, as proposed by the *LiJi*. Historically, no one else had drawn such conclusions from these short lines *LJ*: indeed, no scholar prior to Ban Zhao had paid much attention to them at all: most scholars focused on men.

Note how Ban Zhao has interpreted the negative proclamations found in the *LJ*: she progresses from what is unnecessary in a woman (to be extraordinarily unique and intellectual) to what exactly she must do (conduct herself with restraint and modesty so as not to court shame). It is easy to understand how scholars might interpret this as chauvinistic attempt by Ban Zhao to limit other women’s actions, proving that she is more



one of the group of elite male scholars than even they could demonstrate. However, I believe that what Ban Zhao intends through this very thorough interpretation of womanly qualities is to help woman of a certain socio-economic class to negotiate the minefields of a socially and politically complex marriage alliance, for it was elite woman who had to worry about serving wine and food to guests: certainly this was of no concern to peasant women. Hence these characteristics, rather than being arbitrarily drawn, form a source of power and defense: they can either bring success or ruin and it is the degree of skillful execution which determines one's fate.

Moreover, it was women of this class, with husbands ensconced in political careers, whose comportment could jeopardize their husband's position and his entire kinship system. By directing women to avoid extremity in behavior, clothing or hygiene, she provided women with a blueprint which would support their husband's family, while at the same time maintaining a great deal of independence within these boundaries: after all, a woman need not engage in ribald behavior in order to express herself, nor need she be outrageously outfitted in order to display herself to advantage. It is this, I believe, that is the crux of argument thus far, that although a woman need not be outrageous in any type of display, whether physical or verbal, she can still exercise a great deal of activity to avoid, allowing women to exercise their agency in other ways. By providing a domestic technological blueprint, Ban Zhao ensures that women of a certain status will succeed in their domestic situations.

We must resist conjuring contemporary visions of oppression with such key words as "serve" and "yielding" for what is important in this equation is that a woman is an essential component of the marriage alliance. A man guides nothing if he does not have a similarly well-schooled woman aiding him. It is an interdependent relationship comprised of a hierarchy when viewed from without; from within, the power balance is divided more equally than the language implies.

Finally, these methods are focused primarily on the interaction between the woman and her husband. The format of this treatise is predicated on building from basic tenets and instructions to increasingly complicated modes behaviors and interactions. Moreover, a solid foundation between husband and wife is necessary else nought else will succeed. Thus these first four sections comprise this very task: making explicit the techniques and expectations for a woman so that she possesses the tools necessary to negotiate an even larger, more complex social structure.

This continues in the next section where Ban Zhao progresses from a woman's conduct general conduct to specific interactions with her new family. Let us begin with section five, "Fixed Attention." The title itself embodies each skill elaborated in this section: all activity must be undertaken with undivided, focused attentiveness. To no surprise, those actions are performed in service of one's husband, but in the process, she herself is served by ensuring that relations progress smoothly:

"According to the *Book of Rites* a husband's duty is to take more than one wife, however a wife should not follow two masters in marriage. Thus it is said that a husband is (a woman's) Heaven. Heaven's will must not be shirked, and a husband must not be left. If a man's conduct offends the gods and spirits, Heaven will punish that person; if propriety is transgressed (by a woman) then her husband will disdain her. Thus the

*Nuxian*<sup>58</sup> says, ‘To attain purpose in one husband, this is eternal completion. To lose purpose in one husband is have completely failed.’ Again, as these words iterate, a woman cannot but seek a husband’s affections (via her faithful actions and attentions). Moreover, that which is sought must not be done so through artfully spoken words nor illicit relations; she must abide in rites and propriety,” (84:2790).

Both the content and the commentarial style of this section require examination. First, let us examine the content of her commentary. What has essentially occurred in this section is that Ban Zhao has fixed not only her understanding of the base text, the *Book of Rites*, but in so doing, she has similarly fixed the role of women in society. That role resides primarily in the household, keeping it for her husband, so that her husband might succeed outside. If this entailed additional women sharing the home, then it was only as to be expected and should not be a woman’s main concern. That was to maintain a relationship with her husband which resulted in his affections.

In understanding this issue, we must not view it with a contemporary morality, for the issue is not of oppression but of harmony, of understanding the order of things and the relationships which ensue from this order as established by the concepts of *yin-yang* and the *san gang*. This is not to deny the *effect* of Ban Zhao’s writings, which may indeed have resulted in oppressive behavior by men, for they certainly did, as the later domestic treatises attest. Yet the *NJ* itself does not argue for oppression, but rather, for a clear understanding of the separation and complementary nature of social roles between man and woman. With this in mind, then, Ban Zhao declares that a woman’s heaven is her husband, and he must be treated accordingly by offering her undivided attention. She should not dissipate herself with extracurricular activities and if she must venture forth, she must not draw attention to herself, presumably again because this would detract from the undivided attention her *husband* should receive from the outer social sphere. Thus frivolity, gluttony, materialism are shunned as qualities of a licentious and improper woman (read: a woman neglectful of her proper wifely duties). Interestingly, a woman who concentrates solely on her husband does not undermine *his* bid for social attention and power. Instead, to defer to him *allows* him to more effectively attain his goals.

Now let us move to the issue of the style of commentary of this section. It is slightly different from the previous sections in that it invokes the *LiJi* without directly quoting from it. Instead, Ban Zhao makes a reference to the *Book of Rites*’ content and assumes that her own explanation of that content will suffice as an authoritative reference. She also veers from sole use of the Confucian Classics and refers later to another no-longer extant work, the *Nuxian* or the *Regulations for Women*. The significance lies in her trust that she need not only engage in commentary based on traditional literature, but that she could name another work aimed solely at women, or at least, that treated women as its sole subject matter. In other words, she was becoming braver in her content as the work moved on: she had proved herself, intellectually through constant references to the classics, and literarily, through her learned dialogical exposition with the material. Now she could expand her literary horizons a bit, if you will, by allowing herself references to materials beyond the Confucian Classics to other, less recognized works.

The last two sections focus on women in their social roles with extended family members, turning from a woman’s relationship with a man to general skills and

methodology. These techniques, while drawn from the Classics' portrayal of women aim at promoting clear demarcations between a woman's social and physical boundaries. The sixth segment, entitled "Absolute Obedience" refers to a woman's strategy for dealing with her parents-in-law:

"In a husband, a woman obtains the love of one person; to lose his love is to fail completely. A woman should thus be determined and focused in her speech. As for the affection of her parents-in-law, how would she lose that? In the course of things, there are times when affection for one can cause estrangement from another, and when one's principled actions can cause the ruin of another. Thus if a husband himself declares his love (for a woman) and yet his parents do not, this also implies that her principled actions have caused his ruin. How then, can she gain their affection? She must be resolute in her acceptance of her circumstances. If her mother-in-law says "It is not so" then that is the case, and she must be resolute in accepting these orders. If her mother-in-law says "It is so," yet herself perceives it is not so, then again she should obey these orders. One must not oppose or rebel against these (perceived) errors or be contentious about what is right and wrong. This then is to accept the circumstances. Thus the *Nuxian* says, 'If a wife is like a shadow or echo, this can but be praiseworthy,'" (84: 2790).

Striking in this section's structure is the lack of transition from husband to mother-in-law. It is almost as if they form a unified affinal structure, at least as far as the wife/daughter-in-law is concerned. The implications are clear: it is not only the husband whom a woman must concern herself with: she must also be aware that her principled actions account for the wishes (as opposed to actual needs) of her mother-in-law.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, it is clear that a mother's assessment of her daughter-in-law which is important; the father's presence is pro forma and does not in actuality exert any influence upon the daughter-in-law's behaviors because it is the mother who controls the household.

As to the responsiveness expected of daughter-in-law, again what we are witnessing is the strong *advice* on strategies to ensure a smooth relationship with both husband and mother-in-law. Clearly, this section is primarily a technical treatise, imparting the most necessary skills for effective cohabitation. To lend itself further authority, however, Ban Zhao ends with some formulaic justifications, along the lines of, "And I'm not the only one who says this," thereby justifying her own opinions. Note, however, that unlike most commentary, she has grown more confident in her structure and she merely tacks on the authoritative voice *after* she has proposed her own thesis. This is, then, another example of the way this text operates: as a technical treatise which utilizes the literary strategy of commentary to authorize the opinions set forth.

The last section devotes itself to cultivating the favor of one's sisters and brothers-in-law. Nurturing these relationships produces a complementary result of *harmony*. Hence, we see attentiveness with one's husband, obedience with the mother-in-law, and harmony with sisters and brothers. The section reads, in part:

“A wife’s self-respect comes from her husband, which results from his own parents’ affections for her. As for the parents’ affection, this also stems from the praise of his younger brothers and sisters. Regarding their judgment, whether censure or praise, depends on her younger brothers- and sisters-in-law. Thus the affections of the brothers- and sisters-in-law cannot be lost. All who are wise know they must not lose the affection of these brothers- and sisters-in-law, and those who are unable, through harmonious relations, to gain their affection, how blind they are! Though one cannot (strive to be faultless like) a sage, seldom is one without any faults. Thus did Yanzi’s esteemed value rest in his ability to change and Confucius admired his ability to not repeat mistakes; yet how much more can a wife do (compared with this)? Although she may behave as a virtuous woman should, with a character that is astute and wise, how can she be equipped for this. For this reason, if a wife behaves harmoniously, then slander will be banished; if, however, there is estrangement throughout the household, then vices will flourish. This is a certainty. The *Yijing* says, ‘If two people are of the same mind, the result is that they can break metal. If they are of the same voice, it will be sweet-smelling like an orchid.’

Now, as for a wife and her sister-in-law, they share equal social status and are respected equally, yet she should distance herself from (simply garnering) favors and she will be close to rightness. Thus if she is a clever woman who is humbly compliant, then she will be able to rely on rightness to be genuinely good. Her reverence and kindness will beget their support and this will make her excellence manifest and her flaws will remain enshrouded. Her husband’s parents will be sympathetic and approving and thus her husband will commend her beauty. Her reputation will dazzle the neighbors and fortune will extend itself to her own parents,” (84: 2791).

Clearly this last section is very dense and it will require some methodical unpacking. First, let us examine the style of commentary utilized. Recall that I have categorized Ban Zhao’s commentar as a dialogical style, one that interacts with the authoritative text as if it were a dialogue, interrupting the authoritative text with her own conclusions. The key to applying this concept is that because so little of the *Classics* was applicable to women, her dialogue was necessarily confined to discrete sections of the authoritative text, often simply a few lines within the larger canon. However, with these few lines, Ban Zhao not only authorizes her own text, but further enlightens the meaning of these lines. Moreover, she recontextualizes the meaning, so that in the first line, which refers to the admiration by Confucius of one of his disciples, not only explains an ideal of behavior (here, that mistakes are not repeated), but also comments somewhat on the social expectations of women and how they may or may not model themselves after this ideal. Similarly, when Ban Zhao refers to the *YJ*, she has performed two tasks: 1) she authorized her own previous writing and in so doing, she has 2) delineated which actions a woman should perform with one mind and one voice with her husband.

Again, notice how the content of the commentary revolves around imparting specific techniques for successful living. The theme remains constant, the woman a vision of compliance, service and kindness, but within this ideal lies the reward: a woman

recognized for her excellence, her moral superiority and the appreciation extends not simply to herself, but her agnatic kin as well. Thus the benefits for a respectful demeanor towards her in-laws, although they may be younger, are great. This encloses the affinal circle around herself, in essence building a closed structure wherein she can interact successfully to elicit the accolades and power she needs.

### Concluding Remarks

In the preceding pages, I have offered additional layers of genre and historicity towards reading the *NJ*. While previous scholars have concentrated on the historical aspects of the Later Han or have applied more contemporary analyses of the *NJ*, I have tried to add to this discussion some observations about genre and its effect on both the structure of the text and its content. By drawing upon philosophical traditions, as well, I believe the *NJ* becomes not simply a document supporting patrilineal tendencies, but a useful guide in negotiating a complex social world. Moreover, by utilizing numerous philosophical and literary traditions, I have attempted to enhance not only the discussion of the *NJ*, but to address the increasingly cross-disciplinary direction of Chinese literary analysis.

By focusing on women, Ban Zhao created a new literary genre: the technical treatise for women. As such, the *NJ* is a detailed tract which methodically outlines each step a woman must follow to attain and maintain her status as an individual within a kinship organization *and* as an important component of that organization as presented to and perceived by the community. In so doing, it provided a blueprint for later works for and by women such as the *Nu Lunyu*, the *Nu Xiaojing* and technical treatises for families.<sup>60</sup>

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1 Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, (New York: Century Co. 1932:82).

2 See, for example, Paul Rakita Goldin, *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2002); Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2002); R.H. Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1961, reprint 1996).

3 I choose the term "trans-genre" instead of inter-disciplinary because this work transcends the various philosophical and literary traditions it invokes. Instead of working between them and through them, it combines various elements to create a new genre that removes itself from the interstitial, philosophic-literary space.

4 The term "treatise" is used here instead of "instructional text" based on the category Francesca Bray establishes in her work, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1997) because it implies a formal literary work which focuses on a single subject, here, the conduct of women.

5 Although the *Lienü Zhuan* or *Biographies of Women* chapter of the *Han Shu* or *Dynastic History of the Han Dynasty* is a compilation *about* women, it is not clear that the author, Liu Xiang wrote this for women or as a political tract aimed at remonstrating Emperor Cheng (See Raphals 1998: 111). However, it is Ban Zhao's *NJ* which creates a genre of technical treatises for women that is revisited throughout imperial China: in the Northern Qi's *Yan Shi jiaxun* or *Instructions for the Yan Family* (479-501 BCE), the Tang Dynasty *Nu xiao jing* or *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* and the *Analecets for Women* (618-907). These works were reproduced further, with accompanying illustrations to demonstrate exactly what was expected of women (Ebrey 1993: 120, 152). Moreover, these works specifically refer to both the *LNZ*, as well as Ban Zhao and her *NJ*.

6 Jennifer Holmgren has offered a useful approach to contemporary scholarly approaches to feminist sinology ("Myth, Fantasy or Scholarship: Images of the Status of Women in Traditional China," in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Vol.1:6; 1981: 147-170). In this she makes several important observations, among them that contemporary scholarship can ossify the opinions of older scholarly works although those suppositions may not be based in fact. I would add that the agenda of current scholars,

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political and cultural, can further influence both the issues reviewed, as well as the way they are examined. This includes the totalizing assumption of “other” women as universally victimized and singular. This undermines any attempt to see women as *they saw themselves* because it projects a current political agenda (itself flawed in its monolithic approach) onto an analytical method that is inappropriately applied. See also Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997: 255-277, especially 270).

7 Jose Cabezon identifies eight characteristics of scholasticism, out of which the commentary tradition has grown in “Introduction,” and “Conclusion,” in *Scholasticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press. 1998: 1-17, 237-249). These I summarize below:

- 1) A strong sense of tradition, identifying with a specific tradition/lineage;
- 2) Concern with language, both canon and exegesis;
- 3) Proliferativity, or a tendency to textual and analytical inclusiveness;
- 4) The belief that the tradition is complete and compact;
- 5) Epistemological accessibility of the world;
- 6) Systematicity or orderliness in exposition;
- 7) Rationalism in its commitment to reasoned argument; and
- 8) Self-reflexive tendency to objectify and analyze first-order practices and by engaging in the first-order task of commentary (Cabezon 1998:4-5).

8 Daniel Gardener has approached the identification of commentary’s characteristics, including lists which classify commentary’s properties, the reasons behind its creation and methods of legitimizing its necessity in “Confucian Commentary and Chinese Intellectual History (*JAS*, Vol 57: 2. 1998: 397-422). Here I will summarize only the properties:

- 1) It interrupts the words of the classics;
- 2) It responds to the classical text;
- 3) It brings out the meaning of the classic
- 4) It fixes the range of meanings the classic may contain; and
- 5) It legitimizes the base text as authoritative, hence worthy of interpretation (1998:400).

9 Here I define institutional in a social context, so that a community can be deemed an institution which shares similar goals and values, as well as such basic elements as a shared language.

10 Shigehisa Kuriyama, “The Imagination of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body,” in *Body, subject, and Power in China*. Angelo Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994: 23-41. See especially page 31.

11 It is puzzling that many western scholars view the Classics as more restrictive for women than for men based on the fact that they do not address women’s roles specifically. If anything, this is an issue of gender bias, not oppression. This issue is surely won by then men, whose roles are painstakingly drawn in detailed fables and legendary figures of honor which are more restrictive than the vague constructs of omen in their relational roles. That actually allows more room for interpretation by successive generations. These could be either more or less constricting, depending upon the context in which the interpretations were created, including authorial and temporal-spatial considerations. Clearly, the systematic analysis of these issues is worthy of further investigation.

12 Commentary for women diverges from that written for men because it was written for elite women of the highest rank, while commentary for men could be applied to local elites. Both commentarial traditions converge, however, on the amount of social power possessed by their audiences, however, in that their audiences possessed enough power to be addressed in the texts, but not enough to themselves shape policy and philosophy.

13 The Buddhist tradition in India for example progressed for five hundred years with early Theravadan Buddhism before experiencing sufficient stability to allow for a second wave of ideology, namely Mahayana Buddhism.

14 Craig Kallendorf terms this process an expansion of reading the base material (p. 56). In “From Virgil to Vida: The Poeta Theologus in Italian Renaissance Commentary,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56:1 (1995: 41-62).

15 While it is possible to identify contexts which function as literary triggers, it is important to remember that this implies a specific set of events which resulted in the impetus to produce commentary. This might include

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a social climate, philosophical trends and personal factors, but it is naïve to presume singular events or “literary patterns” can be conflated to literary triggers.

16 Scholars studying the Classics and their relationship with women have repeatedly asserted that they were not primarily directed at women: they were concerned primarily with creating a peaceful society based on interdependent hierarchical relationships. See, for examples, Richard Guisso, “Thunder Over the Lake: The Five Classics and the Perceptions of Woman in Early China,” in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship* (Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, eds. Youngstown: Philo Press. 1981: 47-62) and Marina Sung, “The Chinese Lieh-nü Tradition, in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship* (Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, eds. New York: Philo Press. 1981: 63-74). See also Raphals (1998). Pedagogical stories on specific behaviors gentlemen should direct towards their lords were designed to exemplify right behavior which would stabilize the entire nation. The roles outlined for women were general and sparse, never specifying figures who personified either wisdom or foolishness. Instead men

1717 See, for example, Goldin (2001: 48-9, 52) of positive images of women. Also, Guisso (1981: 49-52).

18 The Song Confucianists demonstrated this repeatedly. Zhu Xi’s philosophy was aimed towards reclaiming “old” Confucian values as he saw them in response to the decadent practices of local elites. For him, the most prominent offenses included buying social status through marriage alliances (Zhu Xi denounced the use of dowries and bride wealth), as well as passing successive civil service exams to gain social status. And yet these issues were completely absent from the Classics he refers to and was clearly the advocacy of new ideology under the guise of revisiting the old. See Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993) and Hoyt Tillman, *Confucian Discourse and Chu His’s Ascendancy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1992).

19 1997: 15.

20 A contemporary example might be the instructional “\_\_for Dummies” series of books. Although these books can be extremely useful and provide a fount of information, the authors themselves need not nor deign not to use them. These books are created for a lower “class” of computer users, those less sophisticated, less knowledgeable and hence more “common.”

21 Louis Roy, “Medieval Latin Scholasticism: Some Comparative Features,” in *Scholasticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press. 1998: 19-34, especially 25).

22 See Hinsch 2002. Also Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press. 1998) and R.H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1961, reprinted 1996).

23 Francesca Bray *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1997: 15-16 ).

Technology by this definition includes skills or techniques used in the household resulting in products meaningful for the actor and the larger kinship organization. It is not therefore limited to a technology of the sciences or manufacturing. Moreover, the product can either be material or intangible, such as the skill of literacy. These skills can also produce meaning for both the individual and the kinship organization because they possess the fundamental power to change and shape the individual and, by extension, the organization in which she operates.

24 Fascinating work has been done in recent years on the exploration of self in Chinese philosophy. I refer to such investigations as Douglas Allen’s “Social constructions of Self: Some Asian, Marxist, and Feminist Critiques of Dominant Western Views,” in *Culture and Self: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and West* (Douglas Allen, ed. Boulder: Westview Press. 1997: 3-26), especially 4-6. Also, see Alan Roland, “How Universal is Psychoanalysis? The Self in India, Japan, and the United States,” in *Culture and Self: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and West* (Douglas Allen, ed. Boulder: Westview Press. 1997: 27-42). Finally, Angela Zito, “Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries,” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Angela Zito and Tani E Barlow, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994: 103-130).

25 Kuriyama (1994: 26, 31, 33).

26 This conception of family and community veers sharply from a modern Western European concept. Naomi Tadmor argues that in conduct manuals, diaries, and novels, the structure of a family was a hierarchical structure that was, however, not structured along patrilineal or uterine kinship lines. Instead, the household, and hence the manuals which address its inhabitants, can be flexible, according to the potentially

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unrelated persons operating within (“The Concept of the Household-Family in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Past and Present*, No. 15. 1996: 116-140, especially page 8-9).

One might think that the parallel of later English conduct manuals of the 18th century primarily directed at women to the technical treatise genre begun by Ban Zhao. But Tague notes that the conduct highlighted is not specific, except insofar as a woman must appear loving, and be able to manage her servants (“Love, Honor, and Obedience: Fashionable Women and the Discourse of Marriage in the Early Eighteenth-Century,” *The Journal of British Studies*, 40:1. 2001: 76-106, especially 82-84). She emphasizes that these manuals were directed at an elite because they emphasized wealth and leisure, rather than at a middle-class focused on industry (in the sense of work, as well as a burgeoning industry). I would disagree and offer instead that these *were* directed at a burgeoning middle-class that was concerned with the *accoutrements* of wealth and leisure. Reinscribing women’s roles was central to the imperial contest, in which the middle-class was extremely invested. Thus, the economic and political agency inherent in women’s work had to be undermined in order for men to colonize other countries. See Anne McClintock (1995, 1997) and Anne Stoler (1995) for examples on the reinscription of women’s roles in the imperial contest.

Hence, the middle class that was so invested in the imperial conquest was the very class invested in reinscribing women’s roles. It was less about the actual leisure of these women than the *appearance* of it. This concern was certainly not limited to the colonies, in fact, it began in the metropole and *extended* to the colonies. But it was in the metropole that this ideology was formed, and clarified.

27 Says Stoler, “Family stability and sexual ‘normalcy’ were thus linked to political agitation or quiescence in very concrete ways,” (1997: 349). And while Stoler here is addressing colonial authority in particular, there is ample evidence that this control was exercised to an even greater extent in the metropole because economic and political control rested in great part on the ability to control the economic potential of women.

28 Stoler 1997: 346.

29 See Tani E Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: *Funnü, Guojia, Jiating*,” in *Body, subject, and Power in China* (Angelo Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994: 253-290), especially pages 260-61.

30 Angela Zito, “Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries,” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Angelo Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994: 103-131) page 109.

31 John Hay, “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds; Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1994: 42-77, especially 44, 45, 62).

32 Ibid.

33 Bray, 1997:15.

34 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1992: 193).

35 Eliade, for example, views religious ritual as a technique (*Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader, Vol. 2* (Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, eds. New York: Harper and Row Publishers. 1975: 312).

36 See, for example, Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols, Vol. 2*. In Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter. 1969, reprint 1995) in contrast, focuses on the underlying theory motivating human action, while Bell offers both an historical overview of ritual theory as well as her own interpretation of its function

37 1997: 15.

38 It is important, in other words, to contextualize any work or movement in terms of those centrally involved. Too often one finds scholarly investigations which ignore such factors and look only to the text itself to illuminate its meaning and purpose, an approach which can offer a partial understanding at best.

39 That Ban Zhao says she wrote this work for her daughters does not necessarily make it true, as Hinsch has shown (2002: 123). See also Chen Yu-shih 1996.

40 Raphals (1998: 220).

41 Remember that the main concern of the Classics themselves was to focus on the male personas who embodied an ideal which promoted a society free of military strife and political coups. The ideal was of gentlemen of political and military power who used it to support the greater good: the state. These men flourished when their efforts were put to the state’s use and they perished when they became to arrogant and greedy.

42 Zito (1994: 106).



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43 Richard Guisso, "Thunder Over the Lake: The Five Classics and the Perceptions of Woman in Early China," in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship* (Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, eds. Youngstown: Philo Press. 1981: 47-62, especially 49).

44 Each yin-yang relationship is situation-specific. Therefore a man might fulfill a yin role if interacting with a nobleman, but will act in a yang capacity in relation to his wife. Similarly, a woman may act in the yang position in relation to a young son, as well as towards a daughter-in-law.

45 It would be interesting to delve into the psychological implications of this mirroring response. The validation and containing qualities inherent in this act of mirroring was probably quite important to rulers, fathers, husbands and wives, as well, as important as the activation itself.

46 Here what I am referring to is the way some scholars have reduced the yin-yang concept to its most inflammatory components, judged by contemporary standards of equality and gender theories. This is patently not the main point of this concept and ultimately this view undermines the original intent by ignoring the content in which it was created.

47 We know this from several sources, including portrayals of women in the YJ, the NJ, to name just a few, which emphasized responsive qualities, in contradistinction to more initiative behaviors. The irony is that although women are acknowledged as an important stabilizing factor, the Classics' portrayals are filled with women who are aggressive, especially sexually. The sexual predator was the most common, though this may have been merely a projection of male fantasy.

Nevertheless, women could be clever and ambitious and were appreciated as such, as long as it was directed towards the proper goal: in the service of men, rather than constructed as an end in itself. The central issue becomes not what these women were doing but why. Regulation could ensure that the "why" was a worthwhile end.

48 The definition of "home" is fluid in that it signifies not merely a fixed physical space, but a series of emotional relationships, as well. Therefore, a woman who was formed a political alliance (i.e. marriage) with one family might actually remain loyal to her agnatic family and hence act as their "spy".

49 I disagree with the contention that because the Classics portrayed women in broad stereotypes that this necessarily led later commentators such as Zhu Xi and Yuan Cai towards restrictive guidelines for women. Clearly their constructions of women and their concomitant roles reflected their own views as legitimized by the Classics. There is nothing in the Classics themselves that is inherently more constricting for women than men. That successive generations of scholars interpreted them as continually more limiting for women merely signaled the social and ideological context in which they were created.

50 Some may question whether Ban Zhao knew anything other than these idealized (in both positive and negative connotations) visions, hence that she was either a) addressing other classes of women, or b) at least was acknowledging their existence in her work by using them as the ideal example. This question is moot, however, since there is no evidence that she interacted with anyone outside of the most elite of classes. There is significant evidence, however, that she was aware of the stereotypes, however, through her education, her advisorial capacity, and her written work.

51 See Jennifer Holmgren, *Myth, Fantasy or Scholarship: Images of the Status of Women in Traditional China*, in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 0:6. (1981: 147-170, especially p. 156).

52 The issue of dissemination itself bears further investigation. Of particular interest is the construct which involved both men and women from the same household, resulting in a matrix of interaction, with Ban Zhao instructing not only women, but men, as well.

53 The following is quoted from the SJ as it is translated by R.H. van Gulik (*Sexual Life in Ancient China*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1961, reprinted 1996: 16):

“When a girl is born,  
She is laid on the floor,  
She is clothed in swaddling-bands,  
Given a loom-whorl as a toy.  
She shall wear o badges of honour,  
Shall only take care of food and drink,  
And not cause trouble unto her parents,” (Book of Odes, no. 189).

54 Angela Zito, "Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1994: 111).

55 The emphasis in this sentence is on the duty of women as wives to serve their husbands.

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- 56 See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1992: 122). Also, Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997)
- 57 1981: 155.
- 58 This work, *Regulations for Women*, is no longer extant.
- 59 Goldin sees this passage as an example of woman's role in society in that she must obey without protest (2001: 100). While I agree with this analysis, I believe it de-emphasizes the inherent agency of a woman in an entwined relationship within a larger interlocking social structure.
- 60 Raphals provides a short but interesting chapter on these works, categorized as "instructional texts," in her work *Sharing the Light* (1998: 235-257). See also Bret Hinsch (2002: 121-28).