

## WOMEN OF LATER HAN IDEALS AND REALITY\*

### *Abstract*

Though Confucian teachings might require them to subjugate themselves to the interests of their husband and his family, women of the Han period had a degree of personal autonomy, with rights to property, divorce and remarriage, and some capacity for independent action. At the head of the state, moreover, an empress-dowager held regency power during an imperial minority.

Despite their formal freedoms, however, in practice most women found their fate and fortune subordinated to the interests of men; and while all people were under constant threat of disease and death, a woman faced particular danger in time of childbirth.

Based on accounts from the *Hou Han shu* of Fan Ye and other sources, the present study considers some aspects of this situation.

### *Keywords*

**Han China, women, behaviour, moral teachings**

### *Ideals of Worthy Women*

The biography of Fan Ye in *Songshu*, compiled by his near-contemporary Shen Yue 沈約, presents a most negative account of him: ill-favoured, greedy, boastful and quite lacking in concern for his family or loyalty to his sovereign. Executed for treason in 446, he paid no attention to the complaints and criticism of his mother and his wife, but showed affection for his sister and his concubines.<sup>1</sup>

Though there is no way to tell whether Fan Ye's unorthodox conduct and opinions were responsible, his *Hou Han shu* is the first of the standard histories to include a chapter devoted to women. *Shiji*, *Hanshu* and *Sanguo zhi* had chapters on imperial consorts and passing references to other women; and there was a *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 ascribed to Liu Xiang 劉向 of the late first century BC, with similar works very likely extant at the time. Fan Ye, however, was the

---

\* Renderings of official titles are those used by de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary* [deC 2007], based upon the system established by Homer H Dubs and Hans Bielenstein. There is an account of the Administrative Structure in deC 2007, 1216–1236, and a comparative listing at 1236–1241

<sup>1</sup> *SongS* 69:1819–1834 has the major biography of Fan Ye, with a shorter version in *NS* 33:848–856

Bielenstein 1954, 14–15 *ff*, has an account of Fan Ye and his *Hou Han shu*, there is an entry in Knechtges–Chang 2010, 218–222 [Knechtges], and particular aspects are considered by Egan 1969 and Eicher 2016.

first major historian to pay specific [34] attention to women, not for their roles in the broad history of the time, but as individuals who deserved to be remembered for their own fine conduct.<sup>2</sup> In his Introduction to chapter *HHS* 84/74, he observes how the virtues of women have been described by the ancient classics:

Worthy consorts assist their lords to rule the state; wise women enhance the conduct of their families; good scholars encourage proper custom; virtuous women demonstrate fine principles.<sup>3</sup>

He complains, however, that such admirable behaviour has not received proper attention, and for this reason he has compiled this *Lienü pian* 列女篇.

"Worthy consorts," of course, are dealt with in *HHS* 10A-B, the chapters on empresses and imperial concubines – though not all such women were models of virtue – but for the other three categories Fan Ye presented women of less political significance, some of whom would not have been otherwise recorded.

Naturally but unfortunately, however, most of the information which we have from the histories is distorted in one way or another: when affairs of state are concerned, historians offer explicit or implicit opinion; at a personal level, much of the material in individual biographies came from private sources, and was often selected to emphasise the subject's virtues.<sup>4</sup>

This tendency developed strongly during Later Han, when the second century saw a growing concern with local and family history. *Sanfu jue lu* 三輔決錄 (Evaluative Records of the Three Adjuncts), compiled by Zhao Qi 趙岐 and dealing with gentlemen from the commanderies about the ancient capital of Chang'an 張安, is well known, but it was matched by other works with such titles as *xianxian zhuan* 先賢傳 (Accounts of Worthy Men of the Past) or *qijiu zhuan* 耆舊傳 (Venerable Men and Ancient Affairs) for different commanderies and territories,<sup>5</sup> and *Huayang guo zhi* 華陽國志 (Record of the States to the South of Mount Hua), a compilation from the fourth century, includes biographies from Later Han. All such texts are liable to exaggeration or hagiography.

---

<sup>2</sup> The phrase *lienü* 列女 has varied renderings and interpretations, including "exemplary," "worthy," "virtuous," "categorised" and "arranged." I leave it in transcription.

<sup>3</sup> *HHS* 84/74:2781: 賢妃助國君之政, 哲婦隆家人之道, 高士弘清淳之風, 貞女究明白節。  
The list is rendered slightly differently by Mou 2004, 76, and by González 2009, 115–116 with a variant in note 8. The categories, however, are clear. Appendix D of Mou 2004 at 240–241 has a useful table.

<sup>4</sup> Twitchett 1962, 27.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. deC 2007, xi-xii.

Where women were concerned, the tendency is yet more powerful, for fine qualities reflect favourably upon the family while bad behaviour provides a warning to others. This is true "exemplary" history and, as Hinsch remarks:

... we usually rely on the husband's family for an account of a woman's behavior, even though they would inevitably portray her behavior to their own advantage. Did a woman really commit suicide out of devotion to a deceased husband? Or was she bullied to death by a cruel mother-in-law?<sup>6</sup>

[35]

Accounts of the Liang family, closely associated with the throne from 144 to 159, provide samples of the technique.<sup>7</sup> Liang Shang 梁商, father of the Empress Liang Na 嬪 of Emperor Shun 順, is said to have been cautious and restrained, but his son Liang Ji 冀 is described as ambitious, greedy and cruel. And while Liang Na herself was conscientious, moral and worthy:

Skilled at spinning and needlework, she read the Confucian classics and had portraits of worthy women in her apartments;<sup>8</sup>

her sister Nüying 女瑩, consort of Emperor Huan 桓, was known for her extravagance and jealousy:

Her apartments were ornamented and her costumes splendid. Though she failed to bear a son and the emperor gathered an enormous harem, she still kept control: "if a woman of the palace became pregnant, it was seldom she came to full term."<sup>9</sup>

Liang Ji's wife Sun Shou 孫壽 is described in similarly pejorative terms:

Beautiful, sensual and a leader of fashion, she was grossly extravagant. She bullied her husband and was unfaithful to him, but when he took a concubine she had her rival beaten and disfigured, and destroyed her family.<sup>10</sup>

Such anecdotes and judgements may have elements of reality, but similarly contrasting accounts can be found in other records, and many are clichés. The likelihood of distortion in the biographies of less prominent women, where there is less opportunity to check official records, is obvious.

Despite such uncertainty, however, we may accept there is an element of truth in the stories told by Fan Ye, and we can believe they present a fair picture of the ideals which women of the time were expected to match.

<sup>6</sup> Hinsch 2009, 104, citing Twitchett as above, and referring also to Holmgren 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Further details of the Liang family power are discussed below: xxx–xxx.

<sup>8</sup> *HHS* 10B:438; deC 2007, 454.

<sup>9</sup> *HHS* 10B:444: 每宮人孕育,鮮得全者; deC 2007, 456–457.

<sup>10</sup> *HHS* 34/24:1179–1181; deC 2007, 775–776.

Since the virtues cited by Fan Ye emphasise the role of women within their families, it is not entirely surprising that his models are identified in first instance through a male associate: husband or father. Ban Zhao 班昭 [5] is listed as the wife of Cao Shishu 曹世叔 and daughter of the historian Ban Biao 班彪.<sup>11</sup> Though the Ban family is relevant and was close to the throne, Cao Shishu died young and had small influence on his widow's career. Similarly, Cai Yan 蔡琰 [17] is introduced as the wife of Dong Si 董祀 and daughter of the scholar Cai Yong 蔡邕; but she had been married twice before, spent twenty years among the Xiongnu, and a literary figure in her own right.<sup>12</sup> [36]

Most of Fan Ye's protagonists were noted for family loyalty, though it appeared in differing forms. Ma Lun 馬倫 [10] – also known as a scholar – argued for her father against her husband's pretensions,<sup>13</sup> but others were more dramatic: Cao E 曹娥 [8] and Shuxian Xiong 叔先雄 [16] committed suicide when their fathers drowned;<sup>14</sup> and after the murderer of her husband was captured, Lü Rong 呂榮 [9] received permission to cut off his head and present it at the tomb.<sup>15</sup>

Zhao E 趙娥 [11] was even more enterprising. Her father was murdered by a local rival, and her brothers died before they could take revenge; so she killed the man herself. A stele was erected at her gate and she became famous throughout the empire.<sup>16</sup>

Other women gave passive support. The wealthy Huan Shaojun 桓少君 [1] accepted her husband's simple life,<sup>17</sup> the wife of Wang Ba 王霸 [2] encouraged

<sup>11</sup> Ban Zhao's biography is at *HHS* 84/74:2784–2792. The italicised number in brackets – e.g. [5] – shows the order in which the biography appears in *HHS* 84/74.

Shishu was the style (字 *zi*) of the Lady Ban's husband; his personal name (名 *ming*) was Shao 壽. Swann 1932 has a full account of Ban Zhao's life and work; more recent essays are deC 2007, 8–10, and Lee–Stefanowska 2007, 103–106 [Wong Shiu-hin].

Ban Biao was the father of Ban Gu 班固, compiler of *Hanshu*, and was involved in that work; another son, Ban Chao 班超, became a leading general in central Asia: *HHS* 40/30A: 1323–1330, 40/30A-B:1330–86 and 47/37:1571–86.

<sup>12</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2800–2803; deC 2007, 28–29.

<sup>13</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2796; deC 2007, 646. Ma Lun was a daughter of the scholar Ma Rong 馬融; her sister Zhi 芝 was also known for her learning.

<sup>14</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2794–2795 and 2799–2800; deC 2007, 41 and 885–886.

There is confusion about Shuxian Xiong, for the local history *Huayang guo zhi* and the gazetteer *Shuijing zhu* tell an identical story of a woman named Xian Luo 先絡, and have a very similar account of a Lady Huang Bo 黃帛: deC 2007, 745 and 342.

<sup>15</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2795; deC 2007, 630. In a later incident, she was herself killed by bandits.

<sup>16</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2796–2797; deC 2007, 1097.

<sup>17</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2781–2782; deC 2007, 337.

his ambition to live as a hermit,<sup>18</sup> and Zhao Yuanjiang 趙媛姜 [15] was executed in her husband's stead so he could escape with their young son.<sup>19</sup>

Three widows suffered for their fidelity to their husbands: the Lady Huan 桓 [12] defaced herself to avoid remarriage,<sup>20</sup> Xun Cai 荀采 [14] committed suicide,<sup>21</sup> and the widow of Huangfu Gui 皇甫規 [13] was killed by the usurping minister Dong Zhuo 董卓 when she rejected his proposal.<sup>22</sup>

As for enhancing good conduct, Zhao A 趙阿 [4] killed herself when she failed to reform a man of bad character,<sup>23</sup> but the wife of Yue Yangzi 樂羊子 [6] was made of tougher mettle: she bullied her husband into years of study, criticised him and his mother for taking goods that did not belong to them, and finally killed herself to save that same mother-in-law from a brigand.<sup>24</sup> Li Mujiang 李穆姜 [7], second wife of her husband, was abused by the sons of his first marriage but treated them so generously they were shamed into reform.<sup>25</sup>

The Lady Pang Xing 龐行 [3] took self-abnegation to an extreme:

[37] Since her mother-in-law would drink water only from a particular river, she made a regular trip of four kilometres to fetch it. After she was delayed one day by a storm her husband divorced her, but she stayed close by and sent food to her mother-in-law until she was allowed to return. She then resumed her service even more attentively.

Later, her son also went to get water but was drowned. Not to upset her mother-in-law at the death of her grandson, Pang Xing told her he had travelled to study; she added conviction by pretending to send him new clothes in summer and winter, but threw the garments into the river.<sup>26</sup>

The seventeen ladies of Later Han thus honoured by Fan Ye match those recorded in the *Lienü zhuan* of Liu Xiang. Gathering from several sources, including the Confucian classics, *Shiji*, *Guoyu* 國語 and *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓

<sup>18</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2782–2783; deC 2007, 799.

<sup>19</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2799; deC 2007, 1114.

<sup>20</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2797; deC 2007, 333.

<sup>21</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2798–2799; deC 2007, 925. The lady's father Xun Shuang 荀爽, however, a celebrated scholar-official, emphasised the union of husband and wife, so the precise attribution is doubtful: *HHS* 62/52: 2052.

<sup>22</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2798; deC 2007, 354.

<sup>23</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2784; deC 2007, 1094.

<sup>24</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2792–2793; deC 2007, 1019–1020.

<sup>25</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2793–2794; deC 2007, 420–421.

<sup>26</sup> *HHS* 84/74: 2783–2784; deC 2007, 690. The Lady's biography in *HYGZ* 10B:153 records her personal name. Her husband Jiang Shi 姜詩 was celebrated for his devotion to his mother – including his rejection of his wife – and later became a worthy official; he is mentioned in *HHS* 84/74 and has his own biography in *HYGZ* 10B:148; deC 2007, 377.

詩外傳,<sup>27</sup> Liu Xiang recorded more than a hundred women in seven categories: models of motherhood (母儀 *muyi*); worthy and enlightened (賢明 *xianming*); generous and wise (仁智 *renzhi*); chaste and obedient (貞順 *zhenshun*); virtuous and honourable (節義 *jièyì*); clear-thinking and persuasive (辯通 *biàntōng*); and – negatively – evil favourites (孽嬖 *nièbì*).<sup>28</sup> The lessons are the same: a woman's role is to serve her husband and his family, and to sacrifice her own interests – and perhaps her life – to their well-being.

While *Lienü zhuan* provided models, *Nüjie* 女誡 (Precepts for Women), composed by Ban Zhao in the early second century, is an explicit guide to female conduct.<sup>29</sup> Herself from a scholarly family, Ban Zhao cited the classics and argued the importance of education; chiefly, however, to help a wife serve her new family better. With sections on humility, respect, devotion, obedience and harmony, *Nüjie* encourages modesty and submission.

Ban Zhao refers also to an ancient *Nüxian* 女憲 (Pattern for Women), and there were very likely a number of such works available at the time.<sup>30</sup> So the model of an ideal woman was long established, the New Text teachings of *Bohu tong* 白虎通, record of an imperial conference at the White Tiger Hall in 79, maintained the tradition,<sup>31</sup> and Ban Zhao's exhortations were matched in other tracts of similar title and content composed by men of Later Han.<sup>32</sup>

That was theory; reality could be different. Before discussing the historical records further, we may consider the physical circumstances of a woman's life in early China.

[38]

### ***Birth, sex, childbirth – and their complications***

In the first section of *Nüjie*, Ban Zhao describes how in ancient times a newborn girl was placed on the ground and given a potsherd to play with. Placement on the ground was a sign of humility, and the toy a symbol of her domestic duties, for cloth fibres were rubbed with pottery to soften them for weaving. Her birth was then announced to the ancestors, and an offering made in her name. The lessons drawn are that a woman should devote herself to her family,

<sup>27</sup> Kinney 2014, xxxiii-xxxiv.

<sup>28</sup> Each section has fifteen biographies, with an eighth collection of fifteen supplementary accounts, possibly incorporated later by Ban Zhao: Kinney 2014, xlix-l. This is more organised than Fan Ye's much smaller collection of seventeen.

<sup>29</sup> *HHS* 84/74:2786–2792; Swann 1932, 82–89.

<sup>30</sup> *HHS* 84/74:2790 and 2791; Swann 1932, 87–88 and 97 note 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Bohu tong* is translated by Tjan 1949 and 1952. See also xxx and note 37 below.

<sup>32</sup> See the bibliographic reconstruction of Yao Zhenzong, 2385–2386.

always putting herself last, and the whole argument of *Nijie* reinforces this secondary status.

In practice, however, some babies were not accepted, and were either left to die or actively killed. Infants which appeared sickly, crippled or deformed were likely to be rejected, and the same applied to those which were more than the family could care for. Laws of the Qin dynasty, surely followed by Han, forbade the killing of a healthy infant "merely for the reason that one has (too) many children and does not wish that it should live,"<sup>33</sup> but this is evidence of the problem, and one must doubt the prohibition had great effect. Some parents were punished, and there are stories of children being rescued, but exceptions prove the rule: infanticide or abandonment were widespread.<sup>34</sup>

At every level of society and particularly among the poor, a boy was better: he would maintain the lineage, serve the ancestors and support his parents in their old age. A daughter could be a misfortune: a drain on family resources; of short-term value about the home; and a charge in the future when money was required for her marriage – after which she joined another household and was no further use to her original family. With limited resources in a subsistence economy, any female infant was at risk.<sup>35</sup>

Even for infants which were accepted, the first years of life saw very high mortality. Some estimates suggest that in pre-modern populations as many as half of all children may have died before the age of ten. Both sexes were vulnerable to accident, infection and sickness, including diseases now largely eliminated or no longer fatal.<sup>36</sup> When times were bad, moreover, daughters of a

---

<sup>33</sup> Hulsewé 1985, 139 item D 56.

<sup>34</sup> Considering the situation under Han, Hulsewé 1986, 89, notes an indication that infanticide was not normally treated as murder, but was commonly punished by forced labour rather than by death.

<sup>35</sup> Kinney 1993 discusses this question. As in her note 31, Bielenstein 1967, 15–16, presents female infanticide as a major factor in the steady state of Chinese population from Han through Tang. See also de C 2017, 264–265 note 120, quoting Bielenstein and arguing against Chü 1972, 24.

Beard 2015, 315–316, notes that the abandonment of new-born children is well attested in Rome at the same period, with indications that girls were less wanted than boys, partly on account of their dowries.

On modern times see Ho 1959: at 58 there is a graphic description of parents drowning their new-born daughter; 58–59 has a table of sex ratios in various provinces: in all cases boys outnumber girls, sometimes 130 to 100; the normally expected figure is 107 to 100. At 274–275 Ho notes the pressure of population against economic resources in the early nineteenth century, and contemporary proposals for female infanticide as a means to ease the problem.

<sup>36</sup> Beard 2015, 316.

poor family were more likely to suffer; malnutrition and hard labour can delay puberty and leave the body less equipped for the stress of childbirth.<sup>37</sup> [39]

The expected age for menarche is thirteen or fourteen, and both in the classical West and in China young women of wealthy background, well-fed and well-treated, were marriageable at that time. *Bohu tong* states that a man should take the Cap of Manhood (加元服 *jia yuanfu*) at twenty *sui* and marry at twenty-five or thirty; women were betrothed at fifteen and married at twenty. Such teachings, however, were ignored in practice: young emperors were regularly capped in their teens,<sup>38</sup> while candidates for the imperial harem were recruited from young women of thirteen *sui*, about twelve years old by Western reckoning.<sup>39</sup>

Daughters of great families could receive special selection and several are specifically described as thirteen *sui* at the time, while Deng Sui 鄧綏, future Empress and then Dowager of Emperor He 和, was intended to enter the palace at that age but delayed three years to mourn her father.<sup>40</sup> In similar fashion, many imperial consorts or concubines were married and gave birth in their teens: Emperor Zhang appointed his Empress Dou 竇 in 78 when she was fifteen *sui*, and in the following year his concubine the Lady Liang 梁 gave birth to the future Emperor He at eighteen *sui*.<sup>41</sup>

So marriage was well accepted for young women in their early to mid-teens;<sup>42</sup> and with that came the expectation of childbirth.

In a pre-modern society, childbirth was dangerous. There was a one to two percent chance of a mother's death from each experience: not great odds in themselves, but accumulating over a lifetime of repeated maternity. Besides the injury, pain and exhaustion of normal birth, an awkward presentation of the foetus may lead to agonising death – while in a society knowing little of hygiene there was high possibility of infection for several weeks afterwards. Overall,

---

<sup>37</sup> Shorter 1983, 18–19.

<sup>38</sup> *Bohu tong* 9:1b-2b; Tjan 1949, 245–246. On the domination of the conference by New Text Confucianists and the later disregard of its decisions, see Tjan 1949, 163–164, and de C 2017, 107–108 and 127–128.

*HHS* Annals record the capping of each emperor who came to the throne as a minor. Emperor He 和, son of Emperor Zhang 章, was twelve *sui* when he was capped in 91: *HHS* 4:171; de C 2017, 127–131.

<sup>39</sup> *HHS* 10A:400.

<sup>40</sup> *HHS* 10A:418; de C 2017, 142–142.

<sup>41</sup> *HHS* 10A:415 and 416. See also xxx below.

<sup>42</sup> At the beginning of *Nijie*, Ban Zhao remarks that she herself had married at fourteen *sui*: Swann 1932, 82.

childbirth may have accounted for between five and ten percent of all women's deaths, and a quarter of those between fifteen and fifty.<sup>43</sup>

Abortion was similarly difficult and dangerous. Concoctions based upon ergot – a fungus found on some grasses – were known as abortifacients but were also poisonous, and opinions and practice about dosage varied grossly, with occasional [40] success but potentially fatal side-effects.<sup>44</sup> Other recommendations included mercury, which is both expensive and extremely dangerous,<sup>45</sup> while physical activities, whether carried out by the woman alone or with a well-meaning assistant, could go badly astray.

Contraception methods were uncertain. Breast-feeding might delay the next pregnancy; alum, vinegar, brine and oily or sticky substances in the vagina had some effect; amulets and charms were, of course, useless.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, moreover, theories of conception and advice about fertility were mistaken. Though the middle of the menstrual cycle is the most common period for conception, it was believed in the classical West that the days immediately following the end of menstruation were the most fertile,<sup>47</sup> while in China the error was even more detailed: according to *Dongxuan zi* 洞玄子, a work of the Nanbei chao or Tang, intercourse during the first three days conceived a son; intercourse on the fourth or fifth day a daughter.<sup>48</sup>

There were other solutions for a woman who wished to avoid a life of constant, recurrent and dangerous pregnancy: self-managed infertility, non-vaginal intercourse, and complete abstinence. The first was impracticable until the development of a contraceptive pill in the mid-twentieth century, but it was nonetheless sought for; a recipe of the fifth-century suggested old cloth or paper made from silkworms, burnt to powder and mixed with wine – one may doubt its efficacy.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Shorter 1983, 98 and 241. Chapter 5 discusses "Pain and Death in Childbirth" and Chapter 6 "Infection after Delivery." At 74 he lists different presentations of the foetus: in one sample 93% were normal; 3% were breech (feet, knees or hips) and probably soluble; 4% (traverse or with the face presenting badly) are seriously difficult to deal with.

See also Lee 2005, 218–221, and – on classical Greece and Rome – Demand 1994, 71–78, and Beard 2015, 314. Rousselle 1992, 298, suggests the risk was five or ten percent for each birth, but she misreads her authorities.

<sup>44</sup> Shorter 1983, 183–188, and see Stuart 1911, 59 [*Avena fatua* (雀麥 *Qiaomai*)] and 207–208 [*Hordeum vulgare* (大麥 *Damai*)].

<sup>45</sup> Needham 1974, 286. The citation is to a sixth-century text, but both mercury and cinnabar (mercury sulphide HgS) were used as medicine during Han: e.g. Needham 1980, 184–185 *et saepe*.

<sup>46</sup> Hopkins 1965, 134–135.

<sup>47</sup> Dean-Jones 1994, 172, and Hopkins 1965, 140 with note 47.

<sup>48</sup> Van Gulik 1951, 34; on the origins of that work, see his 21.

<sup>49</sup> Yates 2005, 155–156 note 94. In note 95 Yates refers also to mercury as a means to end pregnancies: *cf.* note 45 above.

Other alternatives – abstinence, or oral or anal connection – were largely impracticable for a peasant wife: her household responsibilities included not only the cultivation of silk and the weaving of cloth but also the sharing of her husband's bed and compliance with his demands. Some must have experienced pleasure, but for many it can have been no more than a chore – with pregnant consequences and danger to follow. For the poor in China, as in the rest of the ancient world, life was hard, food was limited, bodies wore out, and death came early

There was also *coitus interruptus* – regular intercourse, but concluding with the man withdrawing before ejaculation or not ejaculating at all. This was largely out of the woman's control, and there is no way to judge the frequency of such activity at any time or place. It does not appear to have been widely used in classical Greece and Rome,<sup>50</sup> and it was condemned by Jewish and Christian texts,<sup>51</sup> but there was a well-attested tradition in China which approved the technique. As van Gulik summarised it,[41]

... the sexual act was to strengthen the man's vitality by making him absorb the woman's Yin essence, while at the same time the woman would derive physical benefit from the stirring of the latent Yin nature.<sup>52</sup>

The practice may have been quite common, at least among those with access to the sex manuals which recommended it. Though the chief purpose was to strengthen the man, a satisfied woman was thought more likely to provide the desirable essence of Yin;<sup>53</sup> and men who could thus control themselves probably found it easier to manage their marital duties in a harem.

### ***Wives and concubines, entertainers and prostitutes***

The vast majority of women recorded in the texts are members of the landed class, nobility or gentry; the poor were always present but seldom played a notable role; and – as in in most early cultures – marriages were arranged with small concern for the woman's opinion.

In classical Greece and Rome, followed by Western tradition, marriage was between a man and a women, one at a time. There was provision for divorce, so many people engaged in what was effectively serial polygamy, and dealings

---

<sup>50</sup> Hopkins 1965, 140 and 143.

<sup>51</sup> The *locus classicus* is the story of Onan, who spilled his seed upon the ground rather than impregnate his late brother's widow, and was punished by God for this failure to consummate the levirate: *Genesis* 38:9–10. Hopkins 1965, 143–144, cites disapproval of this practice by Jewish rabbis and by St Augustine. [Identification of "the sin of Onan" as masturbation is a modern misinterpretation.]

<sup>52</sup> Van Gulik 1951, 7–8.

<sup>53</sup> Lo and Li 2010, 382, citing the medical text *MWD* 4 from Mawangdui.

with female slaves and prostitutes were well recognised; but only children born in wedlock were recognised as legitimate.

In China, however, polygyny was endorsed by ancient texts, and *Bohu tong* refers to the ruler or a feudal lord wedding nine women at a time.<sup>54</sup> In theory one was regarded as the principal wife, and her son as the leader of the next generation, but a man could take concubines, even from the ranks of female slaves,<sup>55</sup> and inheritance could pass to any son that the father preferred.<sup>56</sup>[42]

Among noted examples at the end of Han, when the warlord Yuan Shao 袁紹 died in 202 he left his state to his youngest son Yuan Shang 尚, and when Liu Biao 劉表 died in 208 he passed his inheritance to his younger son Liu Zong 琮.<sup>57</sup> Their successful rival Cao Cao 曹操 considered a similar move, but was persuaded to grant the succession to his son Cao Pi 丕 rather than to the younger Cao Zhi 植; one reason for his decision was to avoid the confusion which had affected his rivals.<sup>58</sup>

In other respects, however, Cao Cao showed little respect for propriety. The Lady Bian 卞, mother of Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, who became his concubine and then his second wife, is said to have been a "sing-song girl" (倡家 *changjia*). She was very likely a *geisha* or *hetaera* rather than a common prostitute, but it was an uncommon union for a man of rank.<sup>59</sup>

Relations within a harem must always have been complex, with some women favoured at the expense of others either for their sexual attraction or for the children that they bore, and there was ample occasion for jealousy among those contending for the master's attention or – very possibly – homosexual affection among those neglected by the man of the house.<sup>60</sup> There are accounts of one woman fostering and effectively adopting the child of another: the Lady Ding

<sup>54</sup> *Bohu tong* 9:5a-6a; Tjan 1949, 251; see also Huang—Goldin 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Wilbur 1943, 163, citing *HHS* 73/63:2360, and 75/65:2439, suggests that Yuan Shao – as immediately following – was the son of his father by a concubine who had formerly been a slave. In further complication, Yuan Shao was later adopted by his uncle, elder brother of his father, and thus became the senior male of his family in that generation: deC 2010, 19 and 60.

<sup>56</sup> Holders of noble fiefs were more restricted. The marquis Liu Chang 劉敞, a member of the imperial clan, sought to replace his principal wife with a concubine but was ordered to restore his spouse to her proper place and her son to the succession: *HHS* 82/72B:2730; deC 2007, 491–492.

As below at xxx, emperors faced no such restrictions.

<sup>57</sup> See deC 2007 *sub voce*.

<sup>58</sup> See deC 2010, 411–416.

<sup>59</sup> *SGZ* 5:156; deC 2010, 34–35, but *cf.* Cutter and Crowell 1999, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Hinsch 2005, 80, discussing van Gulik 1961/2003, claims that he over-emphasises the incidence of lesbianism. Information, however, is too slight for such a judgement.

丁, first wife of Cao Cao, cared for his son Cao Ang 昂 by the concubine Lady Liu 劉 and later abandoned her husband because she blamed him for the young man's death;<sup>61</sup> while both Yuan Shang and Liu Zong, as above, were supported in their claims to inheritance by their fathers' later wives. Such manoeuvrings were surely just as common at lower levels of politics and society, and they were important and well attested in the struggles of the imperial harem.

Somewhat surprisingly, though there are many references to eunuchs supervising or serving in the imperial harem, there is no mention of them in private households. The texts may have considered them too normal to mention, but it is just as likely that good order and chastity were maintained in those small closed worlds by rivalry, suspicion and mutual spying.

And they were small worlds. Women in a harem were strictly controlled, seldom travelling abroad and firmly escorted by guards and maidservants when they did. There was gossip, intrigue and jealousy, perhaps a few visitors – suitably chaperoned – and occasional entertainment from visiting dancers and other performers, but much of the life must have been tedious.<sup>62</sup>

The imperial harem, of course, was a special case. Very much larger, it was a potential source of power and thus the scene of frequently fierce conflict involving not only the emperor, his empress and his concubines, but also great families and senior officials, eunuchs and maidservants, sometimes including slaves. Because of its importance to the throne considerable detail has been recorded by the histories, and the harem politics of every dynasty have been studied by modern scholars in both China and the West. I have offered analysis and opinions elsewhere and make only a few points here:<sup>63</sup>[43]

- Empresses of Later Han (皇后 *huanghou*) were normally chosen from a limited number of "aristocratic" families which had supported Liu Xiu 劉秀, Emperor Guangwu 光武, in the civil war which brought the restoration of the dynasty. A few consorts came from families of lower rank, but they received limited approval and support.
- Empresses could be appointed and dismissed at the will of the sovereign. The woman need not be the natural mother of the chosen Heir (太子 *taizi*) – most of them were not – but she was regarded as his formal and titular parent.

<sup>61</sup> SGZ 5:156–157; Cutter and Crowell 1999, 91–92.

<sup>62</sup> Hsia 1968, 201–202, quotes Katherine Anne Porter's description of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as "a long, grey, monotonous chain of days, lightened now and then by a sexual bout," and applies it firmly to the celebrated novel *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 "Golden Lotus."

<sup>63</sup> More detailed accounts of the system are in deC 2007, pp 1216–1219, and de C 2017, 108–116.

- When an emperor died, his widow became empress-dowager (皇太后 *huang taihou*). If the heir was under-age, the dowager acted as regent. If the ruler had died without formally naming an heir, the dowager had the right to choose any of his sons for the succession. If he had left no sons, the dowager could choose any member of the imperial clan, with no concern for seniority.

In that regard, from the accession of Liu Zhao 肇, Emperor He, in 88, to that of Liu Xie 協, Emperor Xian 獻, in 189, every sovereign of Later Han came to the throne as a minor and was subject to regency government.

Even without such a possibility of power, the advantages of intimate access to the emperor were obvious, and it is not surprising there was keen competition, with intrigue and slander, libellous accusations, attempts at witchcraft, and occasional murder. Furthermore, while most of the secondary participants in such struggles were men, women and eunuchs of full age, centre stage was often taken by young women in their teens. The Lady Dou, concubine and then consort of Emperor Zhang, was one of these prodigies:<sup>64</sup>

The Lady's great-grandfather Dou Rong 竇融, warlord of the northwest, had been a leading ally of Emperor Guangwu, but the family was later disgraced and her father Dou Xun 勳 was executed. Dou Xun, however, had married a granddaughter of Guangwu, and in 77 the Lady and a younger sister were admitted to the imperial harem; she was made empress in the following year.

Beside the imperial connection, this dramatic change in fortune may have been aided by Dou Xun's nephew Dou Gu 固, first cousin of the new empress, who was also married to a princess and had led a successful campaign against the non-Chinese Xiongnu 匈奴 tribes in the Western Regions 西域, present-day Xinjiang.

In that same year 78, however, an Honoured Lady Song 宋 bore an imperial son Liu Qing 慶; she and her sister were cousins of the Empress-Dowager Ma 馬, consort of Emperor Zhang's father Emperor Ming 明, and under that sponsorship Liu Qing was named Heir in 79. Emperor Zhang's appointment of the Lady Dou may have represented an attempt to balance rival factions at court and avoid too great a commitment to the Ma-Song group.

When the Dowager Ma died in 79, Empress Dou became formal head of the harem, but after three years she had produced no child of her own and was diagnosed as barren. [44] She nonetheless retained the emperor's

---

<sup>64</sup> The biography of the Lady Dou is in *HHS* 10A:416–416; her personal name is not recorded.

affections and confidence, and she managed to persuade him that the Ladies Song were guilty of witchcraft – possibly that they had caused her infertility. In 82 they were sent to the harem prison and killed themselves.

The empress had meantime supported two Ladies Liang 梁, who likewise came from aristocratic lineage with imperial connections, but whose family had fallen from favour. In 79 the younger had given birth to a son Liu Zhao, and after the disgrace of the Song sisters the empress persuaded her husband to dismiss Liu Qing from his position as Heir and set Liu Zhao in his place.

The Liang family might have expected to do well from this, but early in 83, just a few months after Liu Zhao's promotion, an anonymous accusation of treason was levied against Liang Song 竦, father of the two concubines: Liang Song was tortured and died in prison; his daughters were either killed or committed suicide, and remaining members of the family were exiled to the furthest south, present-day Vietnam. Disgrace was so complete that the true parentage of Liu Zhao was forgotten and the empress took the boy as her own.

Five years later in 88, Emperor Zhang died and Liu Zhao, to be known as Emperor He, came to the throne as a minor under the regency of the Lady Dou, now Empress-Dowager.

This is an extraordinary story, and one must acknowledge a sense of horrified admiration for the Lady Dou. Fourteen or fifteen years old when she joined the harem, she became empress a few months later, she was still in her teens when she laid her charge against the Song sisters, and it is hard to believe she was not involved in the destruction of the Liang. She surely had assistance within the palace and from kinfolk outside, but it was she who held the affections of the emperor and took control of the Heir – and all by the age of twenty.

Two particular points may be noted. Firstly, whether by accident or design, there were advantages to the strategy of a wife allowing other women to bear the pains and dangers of birthing – then taking control of the resultant child. And second: the politics of the harem could be a deadly game, and the players were often very young.

### ***Rights and duties***

The imperial harem received serious attention from record-keepers at the palace, and we may accept their accounts as essentially reliable. Similarly, when the histories describe the manner in which a regent dowager exercised power, it is clear that her authority was real.<sup>65</sup> In particular, though the dowager

---

<sup>65</sup> An indication is given by Cai Yong, who describes how court was held in time of regency. The dowager was enthroned on the right of the imperial dais, facing west, and the young

would naturally favour her own family, and might permit her father or other male relative to act on her behalf, [45] the decision to do so was entirely hers, and she was quite capable of maintaining government on her own.<sup>66</sup>

The great example was provided by Deng Sui, consort of Emperor He. When the emperor died in 105 he left two sons, who had been sent from the palace to avoid illness or evil influences. The Dowager Deng brought them to court, rejected the elder as unsuitable for reasons of health, and appointed the younger. When he died soon afterwards, she again passed over the elder brother and brought his cousin Liu You 劉祐, a boy of thirteen *sui*, to the throne; his posthumous title would be Emperor An 安.

Though Emperor An took the Cap of Manhood in 109, he gained no power and the dowager ruled until her death in 121. Just as noteworthy, none of her male kinsmen held any substantial appointment after 110; full imperial authority was exercised by a woman for ten years.

The situation was unusual, but it attracted little comment and less opposition. The dynasty was faced at that time both with financial problems and with a ten-year rebellion of the non-Chinese Qiang 羌 people of the northwest, while Emperor An showed neither great ability nor strong character. A competent, experienced woman was preferable, and the Lady Deng may be ranked with Empress Lü 呂 of Former Han, Empress Wu 武 of Tang 唐, and the Cixi 慈禧 Empress-Dowager of Qing 清 as one of four independent female rulers of China.<sup>67</sup>

Though no other women of Later Han held such power for as long as the Lady Deng, several played a role in politics:<sup>68</sup>

- In 124, heavily influenced by his Empress Yan Ji 閹姬 and by his former wet-nurse Wang Sheng 王聖, Emperor An dismissed his Heir and only son the nine-year-old Liu Bao 保. When the emperor died in the following year

---

sovereign took place opposite her. Two copies were prepared of any memorial or other document, and each received their copy. The presence of a very young emperor was presumably symbolic rather than real.

In introduction to the Chapter on the Eunuchs, however, Fan Ye remarks that much of their influence came from control of communication with a regent dowager, secluded in the women's apartment: *HHS* 78/68:2509. Formal court appearance was one thing, but regular intimate access was more valuable.

<sup>66</sup> Some scholars believe that empress-dowagers were obliged to govern through their male kinsmen. Bielenstein 1980, 152, for example, identifies the office of General-in-Chief [as below] with active regency power. This interpretation is mistaken.

<sup>67</sup> The biography of Dowager Deng is at *HHS* 10A:418–430; deC 2007, 121–128. Her government is discussed by de C 2017, 169–207. A scholarly woman, she was a close friend of the Lady Ban Zhao.

<sup>68</sup> Accounts of these women are in deC 2007 *sub voce*; de C 2017 has a general history.

the Lady Yan, now Dowager, brought a five-year-old boy to the throne. When the child died a few months later, however, a group of eunuchs destroyed the Yan family and restored Liu Bao, Emperor Shun, to the succession.

- When Emperor Shun appointed his empress in 132, the Lady Liang Na was one of four candidates. Her father Liang Shang was a nephew of the Lady Liang who had been mother of Emperor He. Her family had been rehabilitated and returned to favour after the fall of the Dowager Dou, and the choice of the Lady Liang was based upon the imperial connection. Liang Shang became a trusted adviser and acted as chief minister.

When Liang Shang died in 141 the emperor appointed his son Ji in his place, and when Emperor Shun died in 144 Liang Ji brought two child emperors to [46] the throne and controlled the government – first by authority of his sister the dowager and then through the influence of her younger sister Nüying, who had been made empress to Emperor Huan. When she died in 159, however, Emperor Huan arranged a coup with his eunuch attendants and took power for himself.

- When Emperor Huan died in 168, leaving no sons, his Dowager Dou Miao 竇妙 chose the boy Liu Hong 劉宏, Emperor Ling 靈, and governed as regent. Her father Dou Wu 武 and the minister Chen Fan 陳蕃 planned to destroy the eunuchs, but the Dowager refused permission and the eunuchs struck first. Dou Wu and Chen Fan died, the Dowager was imprisoned, and eunuchs controlled the government.
- When Emperor Ling died in 189, his Dowager He 何 ruled on behalf of her son Liu Bian 劉辯. Encouraged by Yuan Shao and other men of family, her brother He Jin 進 likewise planned to deal with the eunuchs, but the Dowager would not approve. The eunuchs killed He Jin and tried to take power, but in the disorder which followed the general Dong Zhuo 董卓 seized power at the capital. Civil war broke out across the empire, and the power of Han was ended.

Though the Dowager Yan had acted in the interests of her family, and the Liang sisters appear to have supported Liang Ji without question, both the Dowager Dou and the Dowager He opposed the wishes of their male kinsmen – with fatal consequences. The authority of a regent dowager is clear: male members of her family might gain access to power, but they were ultimately subordinate to her will.

From the time of the coup against the Dou family under Emperor He in 92, the eunuchs of the harem were heavily involved in politics. With intimate access, they were well-placed for such a role, while members of the regular

bureaucracy were unable to act with comparable effect. In particular, when a dowager chose a new emperor we are repeatedly told that she made her decision in her private apartments (定策禁中 *dingce jinzhong*). Senior officials might recommend a candidate, but their advice could be disregarded.<sup>69</sup>

On many occasions, therefore, and sometimes for years, the fortunes of the dynasty were determined by a woman. Though the circumstances were exceptional, it is clear that people of the time could accept women taking an active role in public affairs.

Outside the imperial court, women of any rank had their own responsibilities. Registers of population, collected by counties each year and forwarded through their commandery to the central government, recorded men and women equally, and both were required to pay poll tax. Women could not hold significant office, but they could be awarded levels of nobility, with advantage for dealings with the [47] law.<sup>70</sup> The sisters and daughters of an emperor were named princesses (公主 *gongzhu*) with fief territory (邑 *yi*) comparable to that of a male marquis (侯 *hou*),<sup>71</sup> while some imperial favourites were given title as Lady (君 *jun*) and likewise received a pension from the tax revenue of their nominal fief.<sup>72</sup>

Commoner women could hold property in their own right. As a means to discourage powerful families, both Qin and Han applied double taxation on households with more than one adult male, so it was customary for parents to divide the family property before their death in order that grown children might establish separate residences;<sup>73</sup> though a daughter would often receive less than her brothers, her share could be substantial. The grant was frequently made at the time of marriage, when it was customary for the bride to receive a

<sup>69</sup> On two occasions in 145 and 146, when Liang Ji and his sister the Dowager were choosing a child emperor the Grand Commandant (太尉 *taiwei*) Li Gu 李固, highest official of the bureaucracy, urged that a mature man of the imperial house be appointed. Liang Ji faced him down in court, however, the majority acquiesced and Li Gu was dismissed. His candidate was later compelled to kill himself, and Li Gu was executed: de C 2017, 273 and 281.

<sup>70</sup> Loewe 2010, 299.

<sup>71</sup> Bielenstein 1980, 107–108.

<sup>72</sup> In 121 Emperor An enfeoffed his former wet-nurse Wang Sheng as Lady of a county in Henei, and in 133 Emperor Shun enfeoffed his former wet-nurse Song E 宋娥 in the same commandery: *HHS* 46/36:1558, and 61/51:2022.

In 159 the mother of Deng Mengnü 鄧猛女, second empress of Emperor Huan, was named Lady of Chang'an, and in 181 the mother of the Empress He of Emperor Ling was granted a county in Nanyang: *HHS* 10B:444 and 449.

<sup>73</sup> On double tax applied to large households, see Ch'ü 1972, 4–9 and 252. Established by Qin at the initiative of the minister Shang Yang 商鞅 in 359 BCE, the levy was maintained through Former and Later Han, being abolished only in the mid-third century by the newly-established Jin 晉 dynasty: *SJ* 68:2230 and *JS* 30:925; Ch'ü 1972, 252.

settlement. It is important to note that – unlike dowries or bride-price in other societies which benefit the husband or his family – such property remained under the control of the wife.<sup>74</sup>

Moral texts such as *Bohu tong* and the *Nüjie* of Ban Zhao asserted that a wife should devote herself to her husband.<sup>75</sup> A man might marry more than once, and could always take concubines, but a woman should be faithful to her first husband, and remarriage was wrong. In later dynasties this became custom and law, but the situation under Qin and Han was different, and many widows or divorced women married again.

Jealousy and disruption within the harem or the wider household were the most serious justifications for divorce, followed by six canonical causes: lasciviousness (淫僻 *yinpi*) including adultery; theft; talking too much; arrogance; a failure to bear children; and repulsive disease.<sup>76</sup> Other reasons could be found, however, and a wife who set herself against her husband's family was probably making a mistake:[48].

- The wife of Li Chong 李充 had her own property, but the couple lived with his mother and brothers. When she suggested they establish a separate household Li Chong pretended to agree and had her prepare a farewell ceremony for the kinfolk and neighbours. Then, however, he took the occasion to confirm his allegiance to his mother and brothers, and drove his wife weeping from the house.<sup>77</sup>
  - The scholar official Bao Yong 鮑永 cared greatly for his step-mother. When his wife spoke unkindly to a dog in her presence he promptly divorced her.<sup>78</sup>
- If a man might divorce his wife, however, a woman could also leave her husband, and several marriages broke up either by mutual consent or by decision of the wife alone.

<sup>74</sup> Holmgren 1985, 4–5, citing Ch'ü 1972, 271–272 and 283. The first example relates to Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, wife of the poet Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 of Former Han [*SJ* 117:3000–3001 and *HS* 57A:2530–2531; Loewe 2000, 751–752], the second to Huan Shaojun [note 17 above]. See also note 82 below.

The term "dowry" may be loosely used for such property transferred at the time of marriage, but it is clear that the woman held ownership: it was a marriage settlement rather than a dowry. See notes 77 and 97 below, and note 4 to D 149 in Hulsewé 1985, 169.

<sup>75</sup> Swann 1932, 87, *Bohu tong* 9:5a; Tjan 1949, 251.

<sup>76</sup> The "Seven Reasons for Divorce" are enumerated by the Woman of Distinction, wife of Bao [Su 蘇] of Song (宋鮑女宗 *Song Bao nü zong*) in *Lienü zhuan* 2.7; Kinney 2014, 88–89, cited by Nylan 2010, 275. The last of the list offers contrast to the marital promise of the Christian tradition "in sickness and in health;" though this obligation too was often honoured in the breach: e.g. Shorter 1983, 9.

<sup>77</sup> *HHS* 81/71:2684; Chü 1972, 303–304, deC 2007, 408.

<sup>78</sup> *DGHJ* 14:1b; deC 2007, 13.

- One case of quasi-mutual consent – though ultimately the woman's decision – is that of Cao Cao and his first wife the Lady Ding: above at 12.
- In contrast, the wife of Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 of Former Han separated from her husband in order to marry a more promising husband. She got it wrong.<sup>79</sup>

Though divorce was probably unusual, widowhood was common. As the life expectancy of both men and women was low, there was high chance that one spouse would survive the other.<sup>80</sup> Despite disapproval from some moralists, with ideal arguments about constant fidelity to the first husband or to his memory, women were free to remarry without embarrassment or loss of status.

Cai Yan is an example. After her first husband died she was captured by Xiongnu raiders and married to one of their chieftains, living with him for twenty years and bearing two sons. When this second husband died, the warlord Cao Cao paid a ransom for her return and she married his officer Dong Si. Fan Ye placed her biography among the worthy women of his *Lienü zhuan*.<sup>81</sup>

It is true that Cao Cao, his family and his rivals of that time had a relaxed attitude toward the stricter proprieties, but there are several other examples, including princesses of Later Han and the Lady Wang Zhi 王姁, consort of Emperor Jing 景 of Former Han and mother of Emperor Wu 武.<sup>82</sup>

Besides this social acceptance, widows – and divorcees – were able to maintain control of their property: as Holmgren remarks,

... we can surmise that [widows] were virtually free to do as they wished with what remained of the husband's property at the time of his death.<sup>83</sup> [50]

Some women found it wise to marry a man who could help manage and work their land; others returned to their original family and contributed to a joint enterprise. Situations could become complex, however, and one was recorded in a stele of 178:<sup>84</sup>

The Lady Xu 徐 married Jin Yuan 金援. Their son died young, and they adopted another boy, Jin Guangyan 廣延, who was a great-nephew of Jin Yuan.

<sup>79</sup> HS 64A:2791; Chü 1972, 276. See also the case of the Lady Xiahou: HHS 68/58:2230; deC 2007, 883.

<sup>80</sup> Likewise, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West it was not unusual for a man or a woman to outlive two or three wives or husbands.

<sup>81</sup> See xxx above, also Chü 1972, 320, and deC 2010, 343 note 29.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. Chü 1972, 42–44 and 267–269; the wife of Sima Xiangru, as in note 72 above, was also a widow.

<sup>83</sup> Holmgren 1985, 5. See also xxx above.

<sup>84</sup> *Lishi* 15, 10b-13a.

Jin Guangyan also married a woman of the Xu family. He became a local officer, but died at the age of twenty and left no children.

When Jin Yuan died some time later, the bulk of the family property was transferred to Jin Yongzhi 雍直, son of Jin Yuan by a concubine.

Jin Yongzhi showed no concern for either of the widows, and indeed pressured the elder Lady Xu to transfer her share of the estate. In protest at such ill-treatment, she had a stele set up to record her complaint.

Here is an example of the difficulties which could develop when adoption and concubinage were so readily accepted. More broadly, one can observe how different interests and different levels of relationship could cause tension both within a household and among kinship groups in a small community.

### ***Women and their Men***

Despite the plethora of instructions to women about duty, responsibility and humility, we may assume that many husbands and wives had true affection for one another. Calm contentment, however, is unlikely to gain the attention of a historian, and such items as we have relate for the most part to the wife's moral support of her husband with advice and encouragement – examples are Huang Shaojun and the wife of Wang Ba<sup>85</sup> – though some others took the matter further:

In 213 Zhao Ang 趙昂 planned a loyalist revolt against a warlord who was holding his son hostage. His wife Wang Yi 王異 told him that it was the duty of a son to give his life for his father's honour. The rebellion was successful, but the boy was indeed killed.<sup>86</sup>

Zhang Chunhua 張春華, wife of Sima Yi 司馬懿 the future founder of the Jin dynasty, was even more direct:

When Sima Yi was first summoned to office by Cao Cao he avoided the call by claiming to be paralysed. The couple's maid-servant, however, saw him rescuing books from a rain-storm. Fearing that she might report the incident, the Lady Zhang killed the woman with her own hands and thereafter did the housework herself.<sup>87</sup>

While histories have many references to mourning carried out for parents, teachers and worthy officials, there are few mentions of grief for wives. Emperors might [50] express sorrow at the death of a consort or concubine, and Emperor Ling composed a mourning hymn and a rhapsody for the Beauty Wang (王美人 *Wang meiren*), mother of Liu Xie the future Emperor Xian, after she

---

<sup>85</sup> See xxx above.

<sup>86</sup> *SGZ* 25:704. Two of the lady's sons had previously been killed by rebels; this one was probably not her own.

<sup>87</sup> *JS* 31:948; deC 2007, 1039–1040.

was murdered by his Empress He.<sup>88</sup> Among those of common rank, Zhou Jizhen 周季貞 is unusual: a nephew of Ban Zhao, he composed a resent-ful "Question to the Gods" (問神 *Wen shen*), asking why they had taken his beloved wife; but his aunt rebuked this failure to accept the will of fate.<sup>89</sup>

Like the son of Zhao Ang, as above, long-term hostages for good behaviour were generally taken from male members of a family, but women too could be involved in warfare, and attitudes and consequences varied:

- In 22 the wife and children of Emperor Guangwu's officer Li Zhong 李忠 were captured and he was called to change sides. Li Zhong refused, however, and instead killed the brother of the enemy leader, who was also being held hostage. Despite this, his family was later rescued unharmed.<sup>90</sup>
- When Guangwu's officer Zhu Fu 朱浮 was fleeing a mutiny in 28 he killed his wife because she was hindering his escape.<sup>91</sup>
- After the family of Bi Chen 畢諶 was captured in 193, Cao Cao gave him permission to join the enemy. He later returned to Cao Cao's service without repercussions.<sup>92</sup>
- The saddest case is probably that of Zhao Bao 趙苞, an administrator on the northern frontier about 180. His wife and children were captured by raiders, and when Zhao Bao brought troops against them they placed his family in their front line. Zhao Bao nonetheless gave orders for the attack, and all his family died. His loyalty gained him a marquisate, but he could not live with the consequences of his choice and died soon afterwards.<sup>93</sup>

Some treated the situation with apparent equanimity. In his early career Liu Bei 劉備, founder of the Three Kingdoms state of Shu-Han 蜀漢, was three times compelled to abandon his wife and concubines. They were twice restored to him, but on the third occasion they remained in the hands of his enemy Cao Cao. There is no sign their fate had any effect on him – his comrade Guan Yu 關羽 was probably more important – and he later sired a son and heir with another concubine.<sup>94</sup>

Pang Lin 龐林, on the other hand, an officer of Liu Bei, was separated from his wife when she was captured by Cao Cao in 208. Fifteen years later, he too

---

<sup>88</sup> *HHS* 10B:450; deC 2007, 798.

<sup>89</sup> DeC 2007, 1144, citing *Sanfu jue*.

<sup>90</sup> *HHS* 21/11: 755–756; deC 2007, 442.

<sup>91</sup> *HHS* 33/23:1137–1146; deC 2007, 1157.

<sup>92</sup> *SGZ* 1:16; deC 2007, 18.

<sup>93</sup> *HHS* 81/71:2692–2693; deC 2007, 1094.

<sup>94</sup> DeC 2010, 199–200.

was captured and the couple were reunited. Touched by their fidelity, Cao Pi the ruler of Wei awarded him a marquisate.<sup>95</sup>[51]

In civil life, women played only a marginal role in the public affairs of men, but they could be involved through others' misconduct. The most obvious danger came from the system of collective responsibility, established in ancient times, confirmed by the laws of Qin and maintained by Han. In principle, any man's criminal or treacherous conduct brought punishment not only upon himself but also upon members of his family, parents, wife and children. The degrees of kinship involved and the penalties inflicted varied according to the severity of the offence, from exile to enslavement, sometimes with branding or tattooing, but wives were always vulnerable and frequently suffered for their husband's wrongdoing.<sup>96</sup>

On the other hand, the penalty for a woman who committed a crime appears to have been slightly more lenient, as her property was not confiscated by the state but was transferred to her husband; it appears the man was not held responsible for the misdeeds of his wife.<sup>97</sup>

Ultimately, however, both in law in in civil conflicts, women were most commonly regarded simply as collateral damage; the second-century hero Su Buwei 蘇不韋 provided a fine example:

The father of Su Buwei was killed in a vendetta by Li Gao 李暁, who soon afterwards became a minister at Luoyang. Evading guards and watchmen, Su Buwei and a few followers tunneled into his enemy's residence and reached the bedroom. Li Gao had left to go to the lavatory, but his concubine and his infant son were there, and Su Buwei killed both of them.

Some suggested that Su Buwei had gone too far by killing innocent people, but the celebrated moralist Guo Tai 郭泰 argued that in challenging the power of the state he matched the greatest heroes of the past. Public opinion agreed with this assessment, and Su Buwei was invited to office by the most senior ministers.<sup>98</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Anecdotal evidence is always suspect, and the incidents cited above are too few – and perhaps too exaggerated and exceptional – to permit any substantial conclusions on the affairs of women under Later Han. There is a vast gap between the regent Dowager Deng, who controlled the government for fifteen

<sup>95</sup> *SGZ* 37/Shu 7:956–57; deC 2007, 688.

<sup>96</sup> *E.g.* *SGZ* 12:376 and Hulsewé 1955, 112 *ff.* See also Nylan 2010, 272.

<sup>97</sup> Hulsewé 1986, 533–534, and 1985, 169 item D 150.

<sup>98</sup> *HHS* 31/21:1108; deC 2007, 757–758.

years, and the unnamed concubine murdered by Su Buwei in a family feud. There are, however, some indications.

The imperial family must be regarded as a special case. Sexual and political conflict among members of the harem was centred upon the favour of the emperor, while princesses – sisters or close kinswomen of the sovereign – could exercise influence. Most importantly, during the minority of an emperor the empress of his predecessor – now dowager – held regency power in her own right; and from 88 to 189 every emperor of Later Han came to the throne as a minor.

Below those high ranks, women were entitled to hold property and to remarry after widowhood or divorce – privileges which would be much more restricted by later dynasties.[52]

At the same time, it was generally accepted that a woman's primary concern was her family, whether it was the one she was born to or the one she entered by marriage. This was the teaching of the moralists, and this was the conduct which was expected and which was most commonly praised.

Sadly, however, the insistence on subordination to the interests of others – as in the *Nüjie* of Ban Zhao – reduced the independence of many women, and meant that some – like the murdered concubine of Li Gao – had no value at all.

## LIST OF PEOPLE

*Unless otherwise indicated, all people listed were alive during Later Han 23-220 AD*

*Dates of birth and/or death are given where possible, following the biographical dictionaries compiled by Loewe [2000] and/or de Crespigny [2007]. Unless otherwise indicated, all dates are AD*

*An asterisk \* indicates a woman*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| Ban Biao 班彪 (3-54)                         | Dou 竇, the Lady (d.97), imperial consort                         |
| Ban Chao 班超 (32-102)                       | Dou Gu 竇固  |
| Ban Gu 班固 (32-92)                          | Dou Miao 竇妙 (d.172), imperial consort*                           |
| Ban Zhao 班昭*                               | Dou Rong 竇融 (15 BC-AD 62)  |
| Bao Su 鮑蘇 of Song (pre-Qin)                | Dou Wu 竇武 (d.168)  |
| Bao Su 鮑蘇, wife of*                        | Dou Xun 竇勳   |
| Bao Yong 鮑永                                | Emperor An 安 [Liu You] (94-125; <i>reg.</i> 106-125)             |
| Bao Yong 鮑永, wife of*                      | Emperor Guangwu 光武 [Liu Xiu] (5 BC-57 AD; <i>reg.</i> 25 -57 AD) |
| Bi Chen 畢諶                                 | Emperor He 和 [Liu Zhao] (79-106; <i>reg.</i> 88-106)             |
| Cai Yan 蔡琰*                                | Emperor Huan 桓 [Liu Zhi] (132-168; <i>reg.</i> 146-168)          |
| Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132-192)                      | Emperor Jing 景 (Former Han: <i>reg.</i> 157-141 BC)              |
| Cao Ang 曹昂 (d.197)                         | Emperor Ling 靈 [Liu Hong] (156-168; <i>reg.</i> 168-189)         |
| Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220)                       | Emperor Ming 明 [Liu Zhuang] (28-75; <i>reg.</i> 57-75)           |
| Cao E 曹娥* (d.143)                          | Emperor Shun 順 [Liu Bao] (115-144; <i>reg.</i> 125-144)          |
| Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226; <i>reg.</i> 220-226)   | Emperor Wu 武 (Former Han: <i>reg.</i> 141-87 BC)                 |
| Cao Shou 曹壽 [Shishu 世叔]                    | Emperor Xian 獻 [Liu Xie] (181-234; <i>reg.</i> 189-220)          |
| Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232)                       |  |
| Chen Fan 陳蕃 (d.168)                        |  |
| Deng Mengnü 鄧猛女 (d.165), imperial consort* |  |
| Deng Sui 鄧綏 (81-121), imperial consort*    |  |
| Ding 丁, the Lady, wife of Cao Cao*         |  |
| Dong Si 董祀                                 |  |
| Dong Zhuo 董卓 (d.192)                       |  |

- Emperor Zhang 章 [Liu Da] (57-88; *reg.*75-88)
- Emperor, the Little 少帝 [Liu Bian] (173?-190; *reg.*189)
- Empress Lü 呂 of Former Han (d.180 BC)\*
- Empress Wu 武 of Tang 唐 (d.705; *reg.*684-705)\*
- the Cixi 慈禧 Empress-Dowager of Qing 清 (1835-1908)\*
- Fan Ye 范曄 (398-446)
- Guan Yu 關羽 (d.219)
- Guo Tai 郭泰 (127/128-169)
- He Jin 何進 (d.189)
- He 何, the Lady (d.189), imperial consort\*
- Huan 桓, the Lady\*
- Huan Shaojun 桓少君\*
- Huang Bo 黃帛\*
- Huangfu Gui 皇甫規 (104-174)
- Huangfu Gui 皇甫規, widow (d.189/190)\*
- Jiang Shi 姜詩
- Jin Guangyan 金廣延
- Jin Yongzhi 金雍直
- Jin Yuan 金援
- Li Chong 李充
- Li Chong 李充, wife of\*
- Li Gao 李暠
- Li Gu 李固 (94?-147)
- Li Mujiang 李穆姜\*
- Li Zhong 李忠 (d.43)
- Liang 梁, the Lady (d.83), imperial concubine\*
- Liang 梁, the Lady (62-83), imperial concubine\*
- Liang Ji 梁冀 (d.159)
- Liang Na 梁嬀 (116-150), imperial consort\*
- Liang Nüying 梁女瑩 (d.159), imperial consort\*
- Liang Shang 梁商 (d.141)
- Liang Song 梁竦 (d.83)
- Liu Bao 劉保, Emperor Shun *q.v.*
- Liu Bei 劉備 (161-223)
- Liu Bian 劉辯 [the Little Emperor 少帝] *q.v.*
- Liu Biao 劉表 (142-208)
- Liu Chang 劉敞
- Liu Da 劉烜, Emperor Zhang *q.v.*
- Liu Hong 劉宏, Emperor Ling *q.v.*
- Liu Qing 劉慶 (78-106)
- Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-8 BC)
- Liu Xie 協, Emperor Xian *q.v.*
- Liu Xiu 劉秀, Emperor Guangwu *q.v.*
- Liu Yang 劉陽 > Liu Zhuang, Emperor Ming *q.v.*
- Liu You 劉祐, Emperor An *q.v.*
- Liu Zhao 劉肇, Emperor He *q.v.*
- Liu Zhi 劉志, Emperor Huan *q.v.*
- Liu Zhuang 劉莊, Emperor Ming *q.v.*
- Liu Zong 劉琮
- Lü Rong 呂榮\*
- Ma 馬, the Lady (40-79), imperial consort\*
- Ma Lun 馬倫 (122-184)\*
- Ma Rong 馬融 (79-166)
- Ma Zhi 馬芝\*
- Pang Lin 龐林

- Pang Xing 龐行\*
- Shang Yang 商鞅 (d.338 BC)
- Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513)
- Shuxian Xiong 叔先雄\*
- Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (c.179-117 BC)
- Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179-251)
- Song 宋, the Lady/Ladies (d.82), imperial concubine/s\*
- Song E 宋娥\*
- Su Buwei 蘇不韋
- Sun Shou 孫壽 (d.159)\*
- Wang Ba 王霸
- Wang Ba 王霸, wife of\*
- Wang Sheng 王聖\*
- Wang Yi 王異\*
- Wang 王, the Lady (d.181), imperial concubine
- Wang Zhi 王姁 (d.126 BC), imperial consort (Former Han)\*
- Xian Luo 先絡\*
- Xu 徐, the Lady, wife of Jin Guangyan\*
- Xu 徐, the Lady, wife of Jin Yuan\*
- Xun Cai 荀采
- Xun Shuang 荀爽 (128-190)
- Yan Ji 閻姬, the Lady (d.126), imperial consort\*
- Yuan Shang 袁尚 (d.207)
- Yuan Shao 袁紹 (d.202)
- Yue Yangzi 樂羊子
- Yue Yangzi 樂羊子, wife of\*
- Zhang Chunhua 張春華 (189-247)\*
- Zhao A 趙阿\*
- Zhao Ang 趙昂
- Zhao Bao 趙苞
- Zhao E 趙娥\*
- Zhao Qi 趙岐 (d.201)
- Zhao Yuanjiang 趙媛姜 (d.201)\*
- Zhou Jizhen 周季貞
- Zhu Fu 朱浮 (d.57)
- Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 (Former Han)
- Zhu Maichen 朱買臣, wife of\*
- Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君 (Former Han)\*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary Sources*

*BHT* *Bohu tong/Baihu tong* 白虎通 compiled by Ban Gu 班固 and others, in *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊; and see Tjan, *White Tiger Discussions* in Secondary sources

*DGHJ* *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記 by various authors of the first and second centuries AD, in *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要

*HHS* *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 [Annals (*benji* 本紀) and *liezhuan* 列傳 (biographies and accounts) by Fan Ye 范曄 (396–446), with commentary compiled under the auspices of Li Xian 李賢, Heir of Tang 章懷太子 (651–684); Treatises (*zhi*) incorporated from the *Xu Han shu* 續漢書 of Sima Biao 司馬彪 (third century) with commentary by Liu Zhao 劉昭 (sixth century)]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1965 also *HHS jijie* 集解 [*HHSJJ*] compiled by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 and others, first published Changsha 1915. Shanghai: Commercial Press [*Wanyou wenku* 萬有文庫 edition] 1940

citation by chapter numbers within sections of the work:

*HHS 1A* = *HHS annals 1A*

*HHS 11/1* = *HHS liezhuan 1* [chapter 11 of the whole work]

*HHS 101/11* = *HHS treatises 11* [chapter 101 of the whole work]

*HS* *Hanshu* 漢書 by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) and others, with commentary by Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) and others. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1962

*HYGZ* *Huayang guo zhi* 華陽國志 by Chang Qu 常璩 [mid-fourth century] and others. Taipei: Commercial Press [*Wanyou wenku* 萬有文庫 edition] 1968

*JS* *Jinshu* 晉書 by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648) and others. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1974

*LS* *Lishi* 隸釋, compiled by Hong Kuo/Gua 洪适 of Song Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1983

*NS* *Nanshi* 南史 by Li Dashi 李大師 (570–628), Li Yanshou 李延壽 (d.c.677) and others. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1975

*SGZ* *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 by Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–297), with commentary compiled by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451), presented to Liu Yu 劉裕, founding Emperor Wu 武 of the Song 宋 dynasty, in 429. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1959

- SJZ* *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d.527). Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she 1990
- SongS* *Songshu* 宋書 by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1974
- ZZTJ* *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), with *variorum* text commentary *Kaoyi* 考異 by Sima Guang and commentary by Hu Sanxing 胡三行 (1230–1302). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1956

### *Secondary Sources*

- Beard, Mary 2015: *SPQR: a history of ancient Rome*. New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation
- Bielenstein, Hans 1947: "The Census of China during the Period 2–742 AD," in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm [BMFEA] 19, 125–163
- 1954: *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty; with Prolegomena on the historiography of the Hou Han shu*, in: BMFEA 26
- 1959: *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty: volume II, the civil war*, in BMFEA 31
- 1967. *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty: volume III, the people*, in BMFEA 39
- 1980: *The Bureaucracy of Han Times*. Cambridge UP
- 1986: "The Institutions of Later Han," in Twitchett and Loewe 1986, 491–519
- Brown, Miranda 2003: "Sons and Mothers in Warring States and Han China, 453 BCE – 220 CE," in *Nan nü* 5.2, 137–169
- Chen Gaohua 陳高華 and Tong Shaosu 童芍素 (editors) 2010–2011: *Zhongguo funü tongshi* 中國婦女通史, Hangzhou chubanshe
- Chiang Chushan 2010: Review of Lee Jen-der 2008, in *Nan nü* 12.1, 146–149
- Choo, Jessey J.C 2012: "That 'Fatty Lump': discourses on the fetus, fetal development, and filial piety in China before the eleventh century CE," in *Nan nü* 14.2, 177–221
- Chü T'ung-tsu 1972: *Han Social Structure* [edited by Jack L Dull], U of Washington Press, Seattle
- Croutier, Alev Lytle 1989: *Harem: the world behind the veil*, Bloomsbury, London
- Crowell, William B 2003: Review of Hinsch 2002, in *Nan nü* 5.2, 240–243
- Cutter, Robert Joe 2013: "To Make Her Mine: women and the rhetoric of property in early and early Medieval *fu*," in *Early Medieval China* 19, 39–57

- Dean-Jones, Lesley 1994: *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science*. Clarendon Press, Oxford
- de Crespigny, Rafe [cited as deC] 2007: *A Biographical Dictionary of the Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23–220 AD)*, Brill, Leiden
- 2010: *Imperial Warlord: a biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD* Brill Leiden
- 2017. *Fire over Luoyang: a history of the Later Han dynasty* Brill, Leiden
- Demand, Nancy 1994: *Birth, Death and Motherhood in Classical Greece*. Johns Hopkins University
- Egan, Ronald C 1979: "The Prose Style of Fan Yeh," in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39.2, 339–401
- Eicher, Sebastian 2016: "Fan Ye's Biography in the *Song shu*: form, content, and impact," in *Early Medieval China* 22, 45–64
- Finley, M.I 1977: "The Silent Women of Rome," in Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity*, Penguin, 124–136
- Fraser, Antonia 1985: *The Weaker Vessel: women's lot in seventeenth-century England*, Methuen, London
- Furth, Charlotte 2005: "Rethinking van Gulik Again" [review of van Gulick 2003] in *Nan nü* 7.1, 71–78
- González, Ana Teresa Sellés 2009: "Strong Minds, Creative Lives: a study of the biographies of Eastern Han women as found in *Hou Han shu lienü zhuan*." MA thesis, McGill University, Montreal
- Gu Lihua 顧麗華 2102: *Handai funü shenghuo qingkuang* 漢代婦女生活情況, Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing
- Hinsch, Bret 2002: *Women in Early Imperial China*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD; see also Crowell 2003 and Hinsch 2016
- 2003: "Textiles and Female Virtue in early imperial Chinese historical writing." In: *Nan nü* 5.2, 170–202
- 2005: "Van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* and the Matter of Homosexuality," in *Nan nü* 7.1, 79–91
- 2007: "The Composition of *Lienüzhuan*: was Liu Xiang the author or editor?" in *Asia Major* 20.1, 1–23
- 2009: "The Genre of Women's Biographies in Imperial China" [review of Loewe 2000, de Crespigny 2007 and Lee and Stefanowska 2007], in *Nan nü* 11.1, 102–123
- 2011: "Male Honor and Female Chastity in Early China," in *Nan nü* 13.2, 169–204
- 2011: *Women in Imperial China* (2nd edition). Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield; see also Yates 2017
- 2016: *Women in Ancient China*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD

- 2016: *Women in Early Medieval China*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD
- Ho, Ping-ti 1959: *Studies on the Population of China, 1368–1953*, Harvard UP
- Holmgren, Jennifer 1979: "Women's Biographies in the *Wei shu*: a study of the moral attitudes and social background found in women's biographies in the dynastic history of the Northern Wei," doctoral thesis, Australian National University, Canberra:
- 1981: "Widow Chastity in the Northern Dynasties: the *lieh-nü* biographies in the *Wei-shu*," in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 23, 165–186
- 1985: "The Economic Foundations of Virtue: widow-remarriage in early and modern China," in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 13, 1–27
- 1991: "Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming," in Watson and Ebrey 1991, 58–97
- Hopkins, Keith 1965: "Contraception in the Roman Empire," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 8.1, 124–151
- Hsia, C.T 1968: *The Classic Chinese Novel: a critical introduction*, Columbia UP
- Huang, Debby Chih-Yen, and Paul R. Goldin 2018: "Polygyny and Its Discontents: a key to understanding traditional Chinese society," in Chiang, Howard (editor). *Sexuality in China : histories of power and pleasure*. University of Washington Press, Seattle [ebook]
- Hulsewé, A.F P 1955: *Remnants of Han Law volume I*, Brill, Leiden
- 1985: *Remnants of Ch'in Law: an annotated translation of the Ch'in legal and administrative rules of the 3rd century BC discovered in Yün-meng Prefecture, Hu-pei province, in 1975*, Brill, Leiden
- 1986: "Ch'in and Han Law," in Twitchett and Loewe *Cambridge History of China I*, 520–544
- Jugel, Ulrike 1976: *Politische Funktion und soziale Stellung der Eunuchen zür späteren Han-Zeit (25–220 n. Chr.)*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden
- Kinney, Anne Behnke 1993: "Infant Abandonment in Early China," in *Early China* 18, 107–138
- (editor and translator) 2014: *Exemplary Women of Early China: the Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Knechtges, David R, and Taiping Chang (editors) 2010: *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: a reference guide; Part One*, Brill, Leiden; also in BrillOnline Chinese Reference Library

- Lee, Jen-der 李貞德 2002: "Wet Nurses in Early Imperial China," in *Nan nü* 2.1, 1–39
- 2005: "Childbirth in Early Imperial China [translated by Sabine Wilms]," in *Nan nü* 7.2, 216–286
- 2008: *Nüren de Zhongguo yiliaoshi: Han-Tang zhijian de jiankang zhaogu yu xingbie* 女人的中國醫療: 漢唐之間的健康照顧與性別 (Women's Chinese medical history: health care and gender in the Han-Tang era), Sanmin shuju, Taipei; and see Chiang 2010
- Lee, Lily Xiao Hong, and AD Stefanowska *et al* (editors) 2007: *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: antiquity through Sui 1600 BCE – 618 CE*, ME Sharpe, Armonk NY
- Lo, Vivienne and Li Jianmin 2010: "Manuscripts, Received Text, and the Healing Arts" in Nylan –and Loewe, *China's Early Empires*, 391-397
- Loewe, Michael 2000: *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods (221 BC – AD 24)*. Leiden: Brill
- see also Twitchett and Loewe, *Cambridge China*
- see also Nylan and Loewe, *China's Early Empires*
- Milburn, Olivia 2016: "Palace Women in the Former Han Dynasty (202 BCE – CE 23): gender and administrative history in the early imperial era," in *Nan nü* 18.2, 195–223
- Mou, Sherry J 2004: *Gentlemen's Prescriptions for Women's Lives: a thousand years of biographies of Chinese women*, Routledge, London
- Needham, Joseph, with Lu Gwei-djen 1974: *Science and Civilisation in China: volume 5, chemistry and chemical technology; part II: spagyric discovery and invention: magisteries of gold and immortality*. Cambridge UP
- , with Ho Ping-yü, Lu Gwei-djen and Nathan Sivin 1980: *Science and Civilisation in China: volume 5, chemistry and chemical technology; part IV: spagyric discovery and invention: apparatus, theories and gifts*. Cambridge UP
- Nylan, Michael 2007: Review of Kathryn M Linduff and Yan Sun (editors), *Gender and Chinese Archaeology*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA: 2004, in *Nan nü* 9.2, 371–374
- 2010: "Administration of the Family," in Nylan and Loewe, *China's Early Empires*, 261–295
- and Michael Loewe (editors) 2010: *China's Early Empires: a reappraisal*, Cambridge UP
- O'Hara, Albert Richard 1945: *The Position of Women in Early China, according to the Lieh Nü Chuan "The Biographies of Eminent Chinese Women"*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC

- Pantel, Pauline Schmitt (editor) 1992: *A History of Women in the West: 1. from ancient goddesses to Christian saints* [translated by Arthur Goldhammer], Harvard UP
- Raphals, Lisa 1998: *Sharing the Light: representations of women and virtue in early China*, SUNY Press, Albany NY
- Rouselle, Aline 1992: "Body Politics in Ancient Rome," in Pantel 1992, 296–336
- Schilling, Dennis, and Jianfei Krall (editors) 2001: *Die Frau im alten China: Bild und Wirklichkeit: Studien zu den Quellen der Zhou- und Han-Zeit*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart:
- Shorter, Edward 1983: *A History of Women's Bodies*, Allen Lane, London
- Stuart, G.A 1911: *Chinese Materia Medica; vegetable kingdom*. Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press [reprinted Taipei: Southern Materials Center 1976]
- Swann, Nancy Lee 1932: *Pan Chao: foremost woman scholar of China, first century AD; background, ancestry, life, and writings of the most celebrated Chinese woman of letters*, The Century Co, New York and London:
- Tjan Tjoe Som 1949 & 1952: *Po hu t'ung: the comprehensive discussions in the White Tiger Hall*, 2 volumes, Brill, Leiden
- Twitchett, Denis 1962: "Problems of Chinese Biography," in Wright and Twitchett, *Confucian Personalities*, 24–39
- and Michael Loewe (editors) 1986. *The Cambridge History of China: volume I the Ch'in and Han empires 221 BC – AD 220*: Cambridge UP
- see also Wright and Twitchett 1962
- van Gulik, R.H 1951: *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: with an essay on Chinese sex life from the Han to the Ch'ing dynasty, BC 206 – AD 1644*, privately published, Tokyo
- 1961/2003: *Sexual Life in Ancient China: a preliminary survey of Chinese sex and society from ca 1500 BC till 1644 AD; with a new introduction and bibliography by Paul R. Goldin*, Brill, Leiden; and see Furth 2005 and Hinsch 2005
- Watson, Rubie S, and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (editors) 1991: *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, U of California P, Berkeley
- Wilbur, C. Martin 1943: *Slavery in China during the Former Han Dynasty 206. BC – AD 25*, Russell & Russell, New York:
- Wilms, Sabine 2005: "'Ten Times More Difficult to Treat' female bodies in medical texts from early imperial China," in *Nan nü* 7.2, 182–215
- Wright, Arthur F, and Denis Twitchett (editors) 1962: *Confucian Personalities*, Stanford UP

- Wu Congxiang 吳從祥 2013: *Handai nüxing lijiao yanjiu* 漢代女性禮教研究  
Qi Lu shushe
- Yao Zhenzong 姚振宗, *Hou Han shu yiwen zhi* 後漢書藝文志, in *Ershiwu shi bubian* 二十五史補編, Kaiming shuju, Shanghai 1936–37 [reprint 1957] II, 2305–2130
- Yates, Robin D. S 2005: "Medicine for Women in Early China: a preliminary survey," in *Nan nü* 7.2, 127–181
- 2017. Review of Hinsch 2011, in *Nan nü* 19.2, 385–393