

**The Changing Role of Women
During the Rise of Neo-Confucianism**

By Alison Campion

History 152, Final Essay

Winter, 2005

For a long time China's society has been strongly influenced by the moral and intellectual codes of Confucianism. Within the society of classic Confucian values women were treated as lesser beings, completely inferior to their male counterparts. However, as time passed and outside influences began to come into China, other theologies, such as Buddhism and Daoism, began to influence Chinese society. Around the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279) China experienced a renewal of Confucianism in the rise of Neo-Confucianism. The introduction of which was intended to both update the old codes of conduct as well as renew society's beliefs in a Confucian way of life. For women, the rise of Neo-Confucianism meant a rebirth of many of the doctrines meant to keep them subservient to men. However, although the majority of changes introduced by the Neo-Confucian model were meant to subjugate women they also helped women by opening the door into feminine intellectual discourse by addressing women directly. So, despite intentions or outward appearances, Neo-Confucianism actually aided women in becoming more independent in the male dominated Chinese society.

Confucius was a philosopher and scholar who lived from approximately 551-479 BC. He tried and failed to gain a high government position during his lifetime and yet his teachings later on went on to have a profound effect on Chinese politics and society. The center of Confucian thought was formed when a group of Confucius' disciples decided to compile the lessons they had learned from their teacher. This compilation became known as *The Analects*. Despite their disorderly compilation, *the Analects* became the center of Chinese intellectual discourse approximately two centuries after the death of Confucius.¹

¹Ebrey, Patricia, *Chinese Civilization: A Source Book*, (New York: The Free Press, 1993) 17-18.

Confucian philosophy centered on the belief in the inherently good nature of men. He taught that the Way may be found through discipline and close study of the Classics. Within the lessons taught by Confucius, one key message was that of the importance of filial piety.

In traditional Confucianism, the roles of conduct are directed by in large towards men and the way in which men must pay all respect to their parents, which is how filial piety is defined for the male. However, a Chinese woman must not only be filial to her parents, but to her parents-in-law, husband, male relatives and even to her own sons. For women this meant complete subjugation first to her father, and then her husband, and finally to her sons. Under this subjugated rule women were not allowed the freedom to pursue their own goals in life. Even after the death of their husbands they were bound by the laws of filial piety to remain loyal to him and either live life as a widow or commit suicide. In fact it was considered better for a woman to commit suicide, as this showed a great amount of filial piety towards her husband.² Although women may have been able to find small ways to control their lives, through control over children and servants, for the most part they were always at the mercy of the will of others and society.

As time passed, other doctrines, such as those of Daoism and Buddhism, gained importance to Chinese society and Confucianism was no longer the only voice of moral and intellectual law. However, during the Song dynasty, in an attempt to bring back many of the key teachings of Confucianism, adapted for a more modern China; Chinese intellectuals began to promulgate the rise of what the Jesuit missionaries later named Neo-Confucianism³. Neo-Confucianism incorporated newer ideas such as Buddhist

² Ebrey, 253.

³Fairbank, John King, *China, A New History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 97.

transcendentalism into the existing traditional Confucian structure.⁴ Neo-Confucians called for people to re-examine their inner self and encouraged people to help society through charitable works. The ultimate goal of Neo-Confucianism was “a means of preserving the imperial order and benefiting while controlling the mass of the people.”⁵ Neo-Confucians also emphasized learning and under these guidelines they established many educational institutions comparable to today's liberal arts colleges. But despite these new movements, many of the basic tenets of Confucianism remained the same.

Just as in classic Confucianism filial piety was at the forefront of the moral codes of Neo-Confucianism. Within the codes for filial piety a woman's role was clearly subservient to men. As an example, in the book entitled *The Book of Filial Piety for Women*, the author, Miss Zheng, describes the way a woman should treat her husband. “From the time her hair is arranged and she meets him [during the wedding ceremony], she maintains the formality appropriate between an official and the ruler. When helping him wash or serving him food, she maintains the reverence appropriate between father and child.”⁶ Clearly under this model the woman was considered inferior to her husband. Her role in life was to serve him, please him and to bear him sons, so that his family line may continue; thus cementing a woman's place as centered on home and family. As in classic Confucianism, if a woman's husband died the woman was expected not to remarry and encouraged to commit suicide. “In the Song dynasty the great Neo-Confucian thinker Cheng Yi had declared that it was better for a widow to starve to death

⁴Fairbank, 98.

⁵Fairbank, 96.

⁶ “The Book of Filial Piety for Women” trans. Patricia Ebrey, from *Under Confucian Eyes; Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, ed. Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 57-58.

than to remarry.”⁷ Women, under Neo-Confucian rule had little to no personal freedom, to the point that even in death her husband has control over a woman’s fate.

In a time when in Europe women were beginning to leave the home and family size decreased under rapid industrialization, in China women were becoming even more tied to the home than before, under the control of men. The only market industry that a Chinese woman could participate in was at-home textile production. Women were allowed, and even encouraged to raise silkworms and weave fabrics which could be sold by men in the market.⁸ This was particularly important to widows since women could not claim any inheritance from their parents or husbands and otherwise lived at the mercy of male family members. This made them even more vulnerable to the whims of the patriarchal society.

Aside from the basic subjugation of women to men, women were subject to a number of social rules and expectations. In addition to her roles as a child-bearer and homemaker Chinese women were expected to prepare and maintain the traditional ancestral rituals. Ancestor worship was central to the Neo-Confucian household; sacrifices had to be made for all male family members. The basics of what was expected for the ancestral rites were largely prescribed by Zhu Xi who composed *Family Rituals (Zhuji jiali)* and was often considered the founder of Neo-Confucianism.⁹ In *Family Rituals* it is made clear that the primary care taker for the ancestral shrine should be the woman of the house. Because of the great importance of these rites they were time-consuming, tedious and burden-some to the women charged with their maintenance, however they were key to the coherence of a the Chinese Neo-Confucian household. In

⁷ Ebrey, 253.

⁸ Bray, Francesca, *Technology and Gender, Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 260-266.

⁹ Bray, 61-62.

this way a woman was tied even closer to home and family through her duties to the ancestral shrine.¹⁰

Around the time of the rise of Neo-Confucianism foot binding also saw a rise in popularity. Foot binding is the practice of binding the feet of women, starting when they are young girls, so that the arch of the foot breaks and the toes are forced under and squeezed together until the entire foot is only three inches in length. This practice was very painful but it became an important status symbol as only those with the money and resources could afford to bind their daughters' feet. The appeal of the bound feet was partially due to the fact that it made women even more fragile and dependent than in their natural state. Because the women with bound feet were unable to walk or even stand without considerable effort and discomfort they became closely tied to their home and family due to the basic fact that they were physically unable to leave the home for any extended period of time.¹¹ And despite the way a woman might feel about her role in society it was always her duty to instill in her children the same the male-centered Neo-Confucian values she had been forced to live by. Under such a patriarchal doctrine it may not seem as though there would be room for a woman to exercise her mind and better herself intellectually, however in its own subtle way, Neo-Confucianism invited women to do just that.

Regardless of the strict rules placed on women under Neo-Confucianism the mere fact that works such as *The Book of Filial Piety for Women* and *Analects for Women*, written to teach women in more direct language about their roles in Neo-Confucian society, have been written shows society understands the need to appeal to women as

¹⁰ Bray, 98-99.

¹¹ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty, Footbinding in China*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 29-53.

people capable of independent thought and action.¹² If we look closely at Ebrey's translated version of *The Book of Filial Piety* and *The Book of Filial Piety for Women* we can see that the left column, the side which directly quotes the sayings of Confucius, is devoid of any kind of compassion or respect towards women. In fact, it hardly mentions women specifically; instead it speaks of the roles of fathers and sons, of ministers and officials. This was the way of classic Confucianism. By not mentioning women at all it stripped them of any value they may have possessed. However, under the Neo-Confucian model, women's roles were detailed for their own knowledge as well as the knowledge of men.¹³ By publishing texts intended for women, society was recognizing women's capability to think intellectually and morally. These works invited women into the world of intellectual discourse, even if their intent was only to tell women the proper way to serve her husband.

In conclusion, we can see that Confucianism has long played a central role in Chinese society so it is not surprising that the rise of Neo-Confucianism had a great impact on society at large, as well as women specifically. Women's roles under Neo-Confucianism, such as house work and presiding over ancestral rites, kept them closely tied to the home and out of the public sphere. However, despite the fact that the doctrines of Neo-Confucianism attempted to keep women as quite, subservient creatures, molded to the will of men, the manner in which this message was delivered to women helped these women to recognize their own intellectual abilities. By having works published for the express purpose of being read by women, Neo-Confucian women were able to begin their own intellectual discourse, even if it was initially confined to the home.

¹² Mann, 47-48.

¹³ Mann, 49-67.

Bibliography

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

Ebrey, Patricia, *Chinese Civilization; A Sourcebook*, (New York: The Free Press, 1993)

¹Fairbank, John King, *China, A New History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992)

Mann, Susan, *Under Confucian Eyes; Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty, Footbinding in China*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2000)