Confucianism and Gender in Early East Asia

2016 FACDIS International Studies Summer Institute

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Common Assumptions about Gender in Early East Asian History

…that Confucianism is responsible for the subordinate position of women in Chinese *(and/or East Asian)* history and culture

Pangu Creation Story
(Xu Zheng, 3rd c. CE?)

Image Source: gsdaquan.com

Early *Human* Creation Story: Nuwa and Fuxi (Han, 200BCE-200CE)

Chinese Cosmology: Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang:
Balance and Complement

Female

- Passivity
- Darkness
- Moon
- Tiger
- Valley
- Broken line
- Even Numbers

Male

- Activity
- Brightness
- Sun
- Dragon
- Mountain
- Unbroken line
- Odd numbers

China's Prehistory: Mythical Emperors (2900-2200 BCE)

c. 2900 BCE: Fu Xi ***(husband or brother of Nu Wa)***

c. 2700 BCE: Huang Di ("Yellow Emperor")

c. 2300-2200 BCE: Three Sage Kings (Yao, Shun, and Yu)

Oracle Bones (Shang, c. 1500 BCE)

What do we learn about gender relations from China's earliest writing?

Some Oracle Bone "Results"

- **[Charge:]** "Lady Hao will give birth and it may not be good."
- **[Verification:]** "After thirty-one days, on *jiayin* [day 51], she gave birth. It really was not good. It was a girl"

Some Oracle Bone "Results"

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- **[Verification:]** "After thirty-one days, on *jiayin* [day 51], she gave birth. It really was not good. It was a girl"
- **[Charge and Verification:]** "It should be Lady Hao whom the king orders to campaign against the Yi."

Confucius (551 BCE - 479 BCE)

Primary Source:

On-Line *Analects of Confucius* (ca. 500 BCE)

http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/analects.1.1.html

Five Confucian Virtues and Relationships

- Benevolence or humanity
- **Filial piety**
- Righteousness
- Propriety/ritual
- Trustworthiness

- Ruler/ruled
- Father/son
- **Husband/wife**
- Older brother and younger brother
- Friend/friend

Filiality Toward Parents

"The Master said, 'When one's parents are alive, one serves them in accordance with the rites and sacrifices to them in accordance with the rites.'"

"[Zai Wo inquired about the three years of mourning, saying that one year was quite long enough.] After Wo went out, the Master said, 'How inhuman [Zai Wo] is! Only when a child is three years old does it leaves his parents' arms. The three years' mourning is the universal mourning everywhere under Heaven. Any [Zai Wo}—was he not the darling of his father and mother for three years?'"

Ban Zhao (ca. 45-116 CE)
"Admonitions for Women"

"On the third day after the birth of a girl, the ancients observed three customs: [first] for three days to place the baby below the bed; [second] to give her a spindle with which to play; and [third] to fast and announce her birth to the ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby below the bed indicated that she was lowly and humble and should regard it as a prime duty to submit to others. To give her a spindle…signified that she should accustom herself to labor."

Ban Zhao (ca. 45-116 CE)
"Admonitions for Women"

"The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with yin and yang….If a husband be unworthy, then he possesses nothing by which to control his wife. If a wife be unworthy, then she possesses nothing with which to serve her husband."

"[Gentlemen of the present age] only know that wives must be controlled and that the husband's authority must be maintained. They therefore teach their boys to read books…Yet only to teach men and not to teach women—is this not ignoring the reciprocal relationship between them?"

Common Assumptions about Gender in Early East Asian History

…that Confucianism is responsible for the subordinate position of women in Chinese *(and/or East Asian)* history and culture

…that (due to this subordinate position) women have held few positions of public authority in East Asian history and culture

Connection:
Different Paths to Power

- China: “Mandate of Heaven”
- Korea: Membership in “Sacred Bones” or “True Bones” class (Silla)
- Japan: Direct relationship to the “Sun Line” of Amaterasu

Lively Chang'an!

Capital of Tang Dynasty China (618-907 CE)

Sporting Life of Tang (Upper Class) Women

Wu Zetian (624-705 CE): China's Only Female Emperor

- Changed the structure of rule

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- Used of Buddhism to solidify power

Empress Wu's Fengxian Temple
(Longmen Caves, Louyang, Henan Province)

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- Changed the structure of rule
- Used of Buddhism to solidify power
- Solidified her legacy at Qianling (her tomb site)

Empress Wu's Tomb, Qianling

"Worldless" Stele

Sixty-one Kings

Korea's Three Kingdoms (313-668 AD)

- Goguryeo/Koguryô
- Paekche/Baekje
- Silla

Public Roles for Women:
Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla (668-935)

- Shamanism
- Buddhism
- as "Sacred Bones" (*songgol*) rulers

3 Kingdoms/Silla Top 17 Posts

- Sacred Bones and True Bones (*chin'gol*): positions 1-5
- Non-royal aristocrats: positions 6-9
- Influential families: positions 10-11
- Ordinary families: positions 12-17

- Theme?

3 Kingdoms/Silla Top 17 Posts

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- Theme? **class, not gender**

Silla Sacred Bones Queens

Sôndôk (Seondeok)

- (r. 632-647)
- Strong leader and diplomat
- Internal improvements

Chindôk (Jindeok)

- (r. 647-654)
- Got Tang Gaozong to attack Paekche
- Adopted Tang customs

Queen Sôndôk's Achievements: Observatory (L) and Punhwang Temple

Japan's History of Female/Male Pairings and Female Rule

- Izanagi/Izanami
- Amaterasu (Sun Goddess!)/Susano-o
- Pimiko/(brother)

Izanagi/Izanami (L) and Amaterasu (R)

Japan's History of Female/Male Pairings and Female Rule

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- Empress Suiko (592-628)/Prince Shôtoku
  *17-Article Constitution

Kingship: Female Emperors to 770

Suiko (592-628)

Kôgyoku (642-645)

Saimei (655-661)

*Empress Wu of China (r. 684-704)

Jitô (690-697) *wife of Temmu

Gemmei (707-715)

Genshô (715-724)

Kôken (749-758) *daughter of Shômu

Shôtoku (764-770) *same daughter, new name

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- China: "Mandate of Heaven"
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- Japan: Direct relationship to the "Sun Line" of Amaterasu—*also, they didn't adopt Confucianism as early or strongly as China and Korea*