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CONSCIENCE AGAINST IDEOLOGICAL MEMORY: RE-READING THE "THREE OBEDIENCES AND FOUR VIRTUES" IN HAN CHINA THROUGH ETHICO-POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: The notion of San cong si de (Three Obediences and Four Virtues) has frequently been regarded as a paradigmatic expression of the subordination and inferior status of women in traditional Chinese society. This interpretation has become particularly influential in modern discussions of gender and Confucian ethics. Yet the historical evidence from the Han dynasty presents a considerably more complex picture. This article rereads the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" through the interconnected concepts of conscience, responsibility, moral agency and ethico-political imagination. It argues that the subsequent memory of these norms can become ideologically selective when a historically differentiated system of social and familial responsibilities is reduced to the binary categories of oppression and liberation. The original framework undoubtedly contained a male-centred hierarchy and did not establish gender equality in political, economic, educational or public life. At the same time, Han sources reveal women exercising moral judgment and counsel, participating in economic production, influencing familial and political affairs, receiving education, making choices concerning marriage and assuming significant responsibility for the moral formation of children and the well-being of the household. The "Three Obediences," therefore, should be

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examined not merely as prescriptions of passive submission, but also in relation to social position, relational dependence, reciprocal responsibility and the ethical obligations embedded in familial relationships. Particular attention is given to the capacity of wives to counsel their husbands, mothers to shape the moral character of their sons, women to participate in productive labour, and women to exercise a degree of agency in matters of marriage. These instances reveal forms of responsible dissent that need not entail a rejection of tradition but may instead arise from within its moral framework. The article argues that responsible historical interpretation requires moving beyond polarized memories of tradition and recovering the internal complexity of inherited ethical systems. Such a rereading neither denies the hierarchical dimensions of Han gender ethics nor romanticizes its social order; rather, it demonstrates how conscience and responsibility could operate within a differentiated structure of social relations and how the remembrance and interpretation of historical traditions themselves entail an ethical responsibility.

Keywords: *Conscience, Ethical Responsibility, Gender, Han Dynasty, Ideological Memory, Moral Agency, Three Obediences and Four Virtues, Women in Han China*.

1. Introduction

Few concepts associated with traditional Chinese society have acquired a more fixed modern meaning than the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" (*san cong si de*). In contemporary academic and public discourse, the expression is frequently associated with the oppression, subjugation and intellectual restriction of women. The concept has consequently become part of a wider historical narrative in which Confucian ethics, patriarchal authority and traditional family structures are interpreted primarily as instruments of female domination. The wider tradition of the "Three Bonds and Five Moral Rules" (*san gang wu chang*) has similarly been interpreted as part of a feudal ethical order that contributed to women's subordinate social position. Such interpretations have been repeatedly reinforced during the past century and have often presented traditional

Confucian gender ethics as one of the principal causes of the limited development and low social status of women in ancient China. Kou Zheng, for example, examines the historical construction of traditional Chinese gender consciousness, while An Chunhuan and Hangliang Wen, Meng Qian and Lianshe Zhang, and Yang Weizhong have variously discussed the formation, ethical implications and historical limitations of *san cong si de* (Kou, 140-148; An, 78-79; Meng, 96-99; Yang, 41-43).

There is substantial historical evidence that supports criticism of the patriarchal dimensions of these traditions. Classical texts did establish differentiated roles between men and women, emphasized women's dependence upon fathers, husbands and sons and contributed to social arrangements in which men generally occupied positions of greater political and public authority. Such realities should neither be denied nor romanticized. Yet the historical question becomes more complicated when one moves from the normative statements of selected texts to the concrete lives of women in the Han dynasty. The difficulty, therefore, is not simply whether the traditional interpretation is "true" or "false." A deeper question concerns the way historical traditions are remembered. A complex ethical tradition can become reduced, through successive interpretations, to a single ideological meaning. In this article, "ideological memory" refers to the selective remembrance and interpretation of a historical tradition through simplified conceptual binaries, whereby complex ethical formations are reduced to categories such as oppression, liberation, conformity or resistance. The concept does not imply deliberate falsification. Rather, it draws attention to the manner in which successive generations remember the past through the concerns and categories of their own historical circumstances.

This problem is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues." If the tradition is remembered exclusively as an instrument of female oppression, evidence of women's responsibility, counsel, economic agency, educational influence and marital autonomy can easily become invisible. Conversely, if the tradition is idealized as a harmonious system in which men and women simply occupied

complementary roles, the very real inequalities embedded in the social order can also be obscured. Both approaches risk replacing historical complexity with ideological certainty. A responsible and scholarly interpretation must therefore hold together two dimensions that are often separated: the patriarchal limitations of the tradition and the forms of moral agency that operated within it. The purpose here is not to establish that Han society achieved gender equality. It clearly did not. Nor is the purpose to deny the subordinate dimensions of *san cong si de*. Rather, the argument is that the category of "absolute obedience" does not adequately describe the range of relationships, responsibilities and forms of agency visible in the historical record.

The classical sources themselves reveal this complexity. The *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, *Hou Hanshu* and other historical writings contain accounts of women who educated children, advised husbands, exercised choices concerning marriage, managed economic resources, contributed to agricultural and textile production and, in certain circumstances, participated in political and administrative life. Anne Behnke Kinney's study of Qin and Han bamboo legal texts further indicates that women possessed a degree of legal autonomy greater than is sometimes assumed (225-245). The notion of 'conscience' becomes important at this point. Conscience need not be understood only in the modern individualistic sense of an interior moral faculty standing completely outside tradition. It can also refer to the capacity to make morally significant judgments within an inherited ethical order. A wife who admonishes her husband when he abandons his responsibilities, a mother who forms her son in benevolence and justice, or a woman who refuses a marriage that violates accepted moral norms may exercise agency not by abandoning tradition but by appealing to its deeper ethical obligations.

Such forms of agency reveal an important dimension of responsibility. The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" did not simply prescribe what women were to refrain from doing; they also assigned responsibilities through which women contributed to family, economy, education and society. The historical evidence therefore allows the tradition to be reconsidered through the relationship between conscience, responsibility and qualified

dissent. The central argument of this article is that the polarized memory of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" obscures the complex relationship between hierarchy, responsibility, conscience and agency. A closer examination of Han sources reveals that women could exercise moral judgment and responsible agency within inherited social structures and could sometimes correct, counsel or resist particular expectations without rejecting the entire ethical framework. Re-reading the tradition in this way does not romanticize Han society; rather, it seeks a more historically responsible understanding of the ways in which ethical traditions functioned in lived experience.

2. Conscience, Organic Holism and the Ethical Meaning of Differentiated Roles

The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" were initially formulated in the pre-Qin period but became established as ethical principles influencing society more extensively after Confucianism acquired a dominant intellectual position during the Han dynasty. Their development must therefore be situated within a larger conceptual framework involving *tian* (heaven), *di* (earth), *yin* and *yang*, ritual propriety, family relationships and the ordering of society. In *Bohu tongyi*, Dong Zhongshu correlated heaven and earth, *yin* and *yang*, honour and inferiority and men and women, thereby establishing a theoretical framework for differentiated gender roles. The *Liji* clearly delineated boundaries between men and women, while *Nüjie*, associated with Ban Zhao, further articulated expectations concerning women's conduct. *Lienüzhuan*, compiled by Liu Xiang, presented numerous accounts of exemplary women and contributed to the formation of traditional gender ideals. These sources undeniably contain hierarchical assumptions concerning gender and helped establish a social order in which women were expected to defer to fathers, husbands and sons.

Nevertheless, the conceptual background of *yin* and *yang* requires more careful consideration. In the geographical and economic context of ancient China, the sages reflected upon the relationship between human beings and the natural world by "observing astronomy and geography, and observing all things

and oneself." The universe was understood as an organic whole in which heaven, earth and human beings were interconnected. The *Zhouyi* expresses this symbolic relationship:

> Heaven (*tian*) is lofty and honourable; the earth (*di*) is low. *Qian* and *kun* were determined. Things high and low appear displayed in a similar relation. the noble and mean had their places assigned accordingly … The attributes expressed by *qian* constitute the male; those expressed by *kun* constitute the female. *Qian* directs the great beginnings of things; *Kun* gives to them their completion. It is by the ease with which it proceeds that *qian* directs and by its unhesitating response that *kun* exhibits such ability. Ease will be easily understood, and freedom from laborious effort will be easily followed. He who is easily understood will have adherents, and he who is easily followed will achieve success. He who has adherents can continue long, and he who achieves success can become great. To be able to continue long shows the virtue of the wise and able man; to be able to become great is the heritage he will acquire. With the attainment of such ease and such freedom from laborious effort, the mastery is got of all principles under the sky. With the attainment of that mastery, [one] makes good his position in the middle (Jin, 34).

The importance of this passage lies not simply in the association of *qian* with male and *kun* with female. It also lies in the language of complementarity, correspondence and interdependence. The sages considered the universe an organic entity composed of heaven, earth and human beings. Its different elements were understood to interact with one another and to contribute to the harmony of the whole. Consequently, terms such as "lofty and honourable" and "low" cannot automatically be equated with modern political categories of domination. The distinction between *yin* and *yang* was simultaneously a distinction of function, relation and correspondence. It is true that such symbolic distinctions could later be transformed into arguments for male superiority. Indeed, Dong Zhongshu's formulation that "husbands, though lowly, are all *yang*, and women, though noble, are all *yin*" can clearly be read as supporting a hierarchy between men and women (Su and Zhong, 325). Yet the symbolic framework itself also contained an account of reciprocal

dependence. Dong Zhongshu developed the relations between monarch and minister, father and son and husband and wife through a generative understanding of the relationship between heaven and earth and between *yin* and *yang*. The husband is associated with *yang* and the wife with *yin*, but the two are not presented simply as isolated powers. *Yang* generates while *yin* assists in formation. Their relationship therefore contains an idea of mutual contribution.

The *Liji* similarly states:

> By the united action of heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*) all things spring up. Thus, the ceremony of marriage is the beginning of a myriad ages … Husband and wife ate, together of the same victim, thus declaring that they were of the same rank. Hence, while the wife had no rank, she was held to be of the rank of her husband, and she took her seat according to the position belonging to him (1456).

This passage illustrates the ambiguity that later ideological memory can easily suppress. The wife does not possess an independent public rank in the same sense as the husband, yet she participates in his rank within the ritual order. The marriage relationship is therefore simultaneously hierarchical and relational. It is neither adequately described as absolute equality nor as absolute subjugation. The meaning of "obedience" itself also requires attention. The expression *san cong* eventually acquired a strong connotation of subordination, but the original meanings included forms of consultation, reference and dependence. *Lienüzhuan* states: "Women must rely on men. If her father is there, she relies on her father; if her husband is there, she relies on her husband; if her son is there, she relies on her son (131)." Dependence, however, does not necessarily eliminate agency. Within a social order structured by differentiated responsibilities, an individual can remain morally responsible for how those responsibilities are fulfilled. The wife could be expected to respect her husband while simultaneously being responsible for advising him.

Bohu tongyi describes husband and wife as being "in harmony" and emphasizes their shared honour and shame. It states that "the wife should offer counsel to her husband, because

both husband and wife share in their honour and shame" (Wu, 233). The *Hou Hanshu* similarly maintains that a virtuous wife should support and guide her husband according to the Dao (2784). This point is crucial for a reconsideration of conscience. If the wife shares in the honour and shame of the husband, she is not merely a passive recipient of his decisions. She has a stake in his moral conduct and therefore possesses a reason to speak, advise and correct. Her dissent can become an expression of responsibility. The historical evidence thus suggests a more complex ethical structure: obedience could coexist with counsel; dependence could coexist with responsibility; differentiated roles could coexist with forms of agency. The existence of hierarchy should not lead us to assume the absence of moral voice. At the same time, it would be historically irresponsible to turn complementarity into a claim of complete equality. Patriarchal social norms continued to shape marital, familial, political, economic and cultural relations. Rosenlee's observation is useful here: "the complementarity and dynamic interaction between yin and yang in the cosmos and in the human body suggest a rather fluid view of the sexual difference between the male and the female, and consequently, if applied to gender, might even suggest a more tolerant view of gender roles" (Rosenlee, 67). Complementarity may therefore open a space for agency without abolishing hierarchy. This tension provides the proper context for examining women's actual lives during the Han dynasty.

3. Women, Moral Agency and Responsible Dissent in Han China

The establishment of the Han dynasty followed the collapse of the Qin dynasty, and successive wars caused extensive social disruption. During the early Han period, political strategies, intellectual orientations and social norms were undergoing reorientation. From Han Gaozu to Emperor Jing, Confucianism remained one among several competing intellectual traditions. It was especially during the reign of Emperor Wu that Confucianism became the dominant intellectual framework of the Han era. Within this changing context, Confucian ethical principles gradually became influential in shaping family and

social life. The differentiation of male and female roles was understood as part of the ordering of family, state and society. Yet historical practice was more varied than the formal statement of roles might suggest.

3.1 Obey the Father Before Marriage: Education, Choice and Family Responsibility

The first of the three obediences concerns the daughter's relationship with her father before marriage. A conventional interpretation might regard this relationship simply as evidence of female dependence. Yet the historical record also contains examples of families that cultivated the intellectual and moral capacities of women. Ban Zhao, associated with the *Hanshu*, belonged to a family with a strong Confucian background. Her education in literature, astronomy and geography and her intellectual accomplishments complicate the assumption that Confucian family culture necessarily prevented women from acquiring substantial learning. Her sister was also described in terms of talent and virtue. Before her marriage, Ding, the daughter-in-law of Ban Zhao, possessed sufficient education to compose essays (*Hou Hanshu*, 2792). Cui Yuan's mother was also well versed in the Classics and literary writings (*Hou Hanshu*, 1704). These examples do not prove that women in Han China enjoyed educational equality. They do, however, demonstrate that the relationship between Confucian family ethics and female intellectual development was not uniform. The family could function not merely as an institution of restriction but also as a space in which women acquired capacities that allowed them to exercise moral and cultural influence.

The same complexity appears in the matter of marriage. Ying Shao's *Fengsu Tongyi* records the famous story of a young woman who was courted by two men: one was wealthy but unattractive, while the other was handsome but poor. When her parents asked her to choose, she replied through the humorous expression that she wished to "eat in the eastern household and lodge in the western one" (Ying, 600). Whatever judgment one makes of her preference, the story indicates that her own will was taken seriously. A similar dynamic appears in "The Peafowls to

the Southeast Fly," where Liu Lanzhi's mother refuses a marriage proposal because Liu Lanzhi already had a commitment to Jiao Zhongqing. Her mother explains, "The woman has an oath first, and I would not dare to say anything" (*Yutai xinyong*, 128). The significance of the episode lies in the recognition of the daughter's prior moral commitment. Such examples suggest that conscience in this setting was not necessarily conceived as an autonomous self-detached from social relations. Rather, moral agency emerged through commitments, promises, family obligations and socially recognized forms of choice. A daughter's voice could be legitimate precisely because it was connected to an ethical relationship.

Questions of property also reveal forms of female agency. Daughters could receive wealth from parents through dowries, and these could remain associated with the woman rather than simply becoming unrestricted property of the husband's family. The story of Zhuo Wenjun is illustrative. After she eloped, her father initially refused financial assistance, but eventually provided her with servants, money and a substantial dowry (*Shiji*, 3001). Such practices indicate that the daughter retained a recognized economic identity within the family. Thus, the first obedience should not be read simply as the erasure of the daughter's agency. It existed within a network of familial authority, but that network could also include education, economic provision, recognition of personal preference and moral responsibility.

3.2 Obey the Husband After Marriage: Counsel, Conscience and Qualified Dissent

The second obedience concerns the relationship between wife and husband. Here the tension between hierarchy and agency becomes particularly visible. The conventional image of the submissive wife can obscure the evidence of marital reciprocity found in Han sources. The *Hou Hanshu* records Pang Gong and his wife treating each other with mutual respect "like honoured guests" (2776). Fan Ying argued that wives should be regarded as equal to their husbands in relation to ancestral offerings and that respect should be reciprocal (*Hou Hanshu*, 2714). More

significantly, the historical record contains examples of women exercising moral judgment over their husbands. The *Hanshu* records that Wang Zhang became seriously ill while pursuing his studies and considered abandoning his education. His wife admonished him:

> Even in the face of such a grave illness today, one should not succumb to despair. Instead, it is a time to gather one's determination, strive vigorously, and rise above this adversity. Why would you resign yourself to such circumstances? (Ban, 3238-3239).

Her intervention is important for the argument concerning conscience. She does not reject the marital relationship or claim authority in a modern individualistic sense. Instead, she speaks because she perceives a moral responsibility shared by both spouses. Her counsel challenges her husband's immediate inclination and calls him back to perseverance. This is a form of qualified dissent. It is dissent because she refuses to remain silent before what she considers a failure of responsibility. It is qualified because the purpose of her disagreement is not the destruction of the relationship but its ethical fulfilment. The same principle appears in *Bohu tongyi*: "the wife should offer counsel to her husband, because both husband and wife share in their honour and shame" (233). If honour and shame are shared, then the wife has a moral interest in the husband's actions. Counsel becomes part of marital responsibility.

The possibility of marital separation provides another important example. Kong Guang maintained that the relationship between husband and wife should be governed by moral principles and that when those principles were seriously violated, separation could be justified (*Hou Hanshu*, 3355). The story of Lü Rong likewise shows that a woman could leave a marriage in circumstances involving a husband's irresponsible behaviour. Her father, angered by her husband's gambling and unwillingness to work, wanted her to remarry (*Hou Hanshu*, 2795). Peng Wei notes that divorce could be accepted in circumstances involving reprehensible behaviour by the husband, serious illness, extreme poverty, serious conflict between families, or legal offences associated with the husband's family (Peng, 3). These

examples indicate that marriage was not conceived solely as a relationship of unconditional female submission.

The *Liji* defines marital propriety in terms of harmony:

> The rules (*li*) of propriety and of what is right are regarded as the threads by which they seek to maintain in its correctness the relation between ruler and minister; in its generous regard that between father and son; in its harmony that between elder brother and younger; and in a community of sentiment that between husband and wife (1544).

The governing concept is *li*, ritual propriety, but its purpose in marriage is not simply obedience. It is harmony. Such harmony presupposes reciprocal obligations. From this perspective, conscience does not stand outside tradition. It works through tradition by asking whether particular actions remain faithful to the moral purposes of the relationship. The wife who counsels her husband, the woman who refuses an unacceptable marriage, or the wife who leaves a seriously disordered relationship may therefore be understood as exercising ethical judgment within an inherited moral framework. This is precisely where a simplistic opposition between obedience and resistance becomes inadequate. Dissent can arise from within tradition when the demands of conscience appeal to the deeper responsibilities that tradition itself recognizes.

3.3 Obey the sons in Widowhood: Maternal Authority and Moral Formation

The third obedience concerns the situation of a woman after the death of her husband: "when the husband dies, follow the son in life." At first sight, this formulation seems to reinforce female dependence. Yet the actual social relationship between mothers and sons was often more complex. The mother was responsible for educating her son, forming his character and guiding him toward responsible conduct. In old age, the son was expected to support her. Thus, the relationship involved reciprocal obligations rather than unilateral dependence. The story of Juan Buyi is especially significant. His mother was deeply concerned about his treatment of prisoners. When prisoners were rehabilitated, she rejoiced; when they were not, she became

distressed and even refused food. Her moral concern influenced Juan Buyi's conduct as an official, encouraging him to exercise authority firmly but without cruelty (*Hou Hanshu*, 3036-3037). Here the mother exercises conscience through moral formation. Her influence extends beyond the domestic sphere into the administration of justice. She does not hold the official position herself, but her moral judgment shapes the way her son exercises public authority.

The story of Jin Ridi similarly presents maternal influence as formative. His mother raised two sons who were well versed in ritual and law and who received the esteem of Emperor Wu. After her death, the emperor ordered a portrait of her at the Ganquan Palace (*Hou Hanshu*, 2461). The *Hou Hanshu* also records the mother of Cui Shi as a woman of moral virtue and literary knowledge. She instructed her son concerning governance and the administration of people, contributing to his later political success (1732). The mother of Feng Qin was likewise honoured by the emperor because of her exceptional formation of her son; the emperor ordered that she be assisted in the hall and exempted her from kneeling (*Hou Hanshu*, 1187).

These examples reveal a striking feature of the relationship between mothers and sons. Although the formal language of *san cong* places the widow in a relationship of dependence upon her son, the moral influence of the mother could remain considerable even after the son reached adulthood and entered public office. The mother's authority was therefore not simply legal or political authority. It was formative authority. Through education, example and moral counsel, she shaped the conscience of the next generation. Qian Nanxiu and Yang Lianfen similarly argue that mothers in the Han dynasty often assumed primary responsibility for the education of children, a role that could contribute to the development of women's abilities (Qian and Yang, 98-105). Thus, the third obedience also contains an important paradox. The woman may be formally dependent upon the son for support, yet the son may remain morally dependent upon the mother for the formation of his character. The relationship is therefore better understood through reciprocal responsibility than through a simple hierarchy of power.

4. "Women's Work": Economic Responsibility and Social Agency

Among the "Four Virtues," (Women's Virtue *(婦德, fù dé)* – moral character and ethical conduct; Women's Speech *(婦言, fù yán)* – appropriate, measured, and respectful speech; Women's Appearance *(婦容, fù róng)* – proper appearance, comportment, and bodily conduct; Women's Work *(婦功, fù gōng)* – practical skills, household duties, and productive work) women's work (*fù gōng*) provides perhaps the clearest evidence that the ethical role assigned to women involved productive responsibility rather than mere domestic passivity. Gu Lihua argues that women's contributions in Han society extended beyond cleaning and child-rearing to fieldwork, sericulture, weaving and small-scale commerce (Gu, 147-168). The agricultural economy depended heavily upon both farming and textile production. The traditional saying that if the husband does not plough, the family suffers hunger, while if the wife does not weave, the family suffers cold, indicates the complementary economic responsibilities assigned to men and women (*Hanshu*, 1128).

Textile production was particularly important. Young women were expected to learn weaving and mulberry cultivation from an early age (*Yutai xinyong*, 27). *Lun Heng* records that women in Qibu were skilled in embroidery and women in Xiangyi were proficient in brocade weaving (Wang, 120). Women also gathered for communal evening weaving, a practice that could increase productivity and develop collective skills (*Hanshu*, 1121). The importance of textile production extended beyond the household. The *Complete Ancient Chinese Prose of the Three Dynasties, Qin, Han, Three Kingdoms, and Six Dynasties* preserves the saying that farmers rejoiced at rain while women workers delighted in the sound of the looms (Yan, 721). Private and official weaving workshops existed, and the scale of silk production was considerable (*Hanshu*, 3070, 1175). Women's textile production also entered commercial life. Women sold textiles to generate income for their families, contributing to the circulation of silk, cotton, cloth and leather in cities and counties (*Hanshu*, 3687). The *Hou Hanshu* indicates the geographical breadth of the textile industry (535).

Women were also involved in handicrafts, commerce, medical practices, singing and dancing (Peng, 24-27). Agricultural labour remained particularly important. Rural women participated in planting, ploughing, weeding and other forms of fieldwork. When men were absent because of education or military service, women frequently assumed a larger share of agricultural responsibilities. The ballad associated with Emperor Huan depicts women working in the fields while their husbands were away fighting foreign tribes: from the greening of the wheat until its wilting, the women worked; where were their husbands? They were in the west fighting the *huzu* (Wang Shizhen, 530). Han portrait bricks discovered at Huangjialing likewise depict women working in the fields. Such evidence complicates the conventional image of a strict division in which men inhabited the public world and women were confined to the domestic sphere. The distinction between men's and women's work certainly existed, but the actual economy required extensive female participation in agriculture and production.

Olivia Milburn's study of palace women in the Former Han dynasty further demonstrates that women could occupy administrative roles within the palace and participate in the management of court life (Milburn, 195-223). The economic dimension of *women's work* is therefore significant for an understanding of responsibility. Women were not merely recipients of social resources. They were producers of material and social wealth. Their work sustained families and contributed to the wider economy. The language of responsibility is especially appropriate here. The "Four Virtues" assigned women expectations concerning virtue, speech, appearance and work, but *work* in this context should not be reduced to domestic obedience. It involved skills, discipline, productivity and contribution to collective well-being. Consequently, women could derive a degree of social recognition precisely from the successful fulfilment of responsibilities that the social order assigned to them. This does not eliminate the limitations of that order, but it does complicate the claim that the ethical tradition rendered women simply passive.

5. Ideological Memory, Polarization and the Ethics of Historical Interpretation

The evidence considered above does not justify replacing one ideological interpretation with another. It would be as problematic to claim that Han China was fundamentally egalitarian as to describe every dimension of Han gender relations as an uncomplicated system of oppression. The historical evidence instead reveals a layered structure. The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" emerged within a social order that was unmistakably male-centred. Men generally possessed greater political authority and wider access to education and public participation. The language of hierarchy could reinforce dependence upon fathers, husbands and sons. These features must be acknowledged. At the same time, women exercised meaningful forms of agency within that order. They could receive education, participate in economic production, influence marital decisions, counsel husbands, educate sons, manage household affairs and, in particular circumstances, exercise political or administrative influence. This is where the concept of ideological memory becomes analytically useful.

The modern memory of *san cong si de* can become polarized when the tradition is reduced to one of two mutually exclusive images: either an oppressive system in which women possessed no meaningful agency, or a harmonious system of complementary roles that contained no serious inequality. Neither representation captures the complexity of the historical evidence. Yang Lei's discussion of changing representations of women across the *Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* and *Shiji* illustrates the broader problem of changing gender representation. Historical memory does not simply reproduce the past; it selects, interprets and reorganizes it. The transition from "evil women" to other forms of gender representation demonstrates how cultural memory itself can change according to the interpretive frameworks of later periods (Yang, 225-245).

Similarly, the modern movement from *san cong si de* to "fear of women," examined by Meng Qian and Lianshe Zhang, demonstrates how traditional gender concepts can acquire new meanings through later social discourse (Meng, 96-99). Kou

Zheng's discussion of conflict and transcendence in traditional Chinese gender thought further shows that gender concepts have been continually interpreted and reconstructed (Kou, 140-148). The ethical problem, therefore, is not merely historical accuracy. It is the responsibility of interpretation. To interpret a tradition responsibly is to resist the temptation to make the past serve a predetermined ideological conclusion. It requires acknowledging evidence that challenges one's preferred interpretation. It also requires distinguishing between the ideals articulated in texts and the practices actually followed in society. This responsibility is particularly important in polarized contexts.

Historical traditions can become symbols in contemporary cultural conflicts. Once a tradition is reduced to a single moral label, its internal debates disappear. Historical actors are transformed into representatives of contemporary ideological categories, and the possibility of learning from the complexity of the past is diminished. A responsible historical conscience must therefore be capable of resisting both romanticization and denunciation. The same principle applies to the interpretation of women's agency. Agency should not be defined only as liberation from tradition. A woman can exercise agency within a tradition by interpreting its obligations, counselling others, choosing among legitimate possibilities, refusing particular forms of conduct, or insisting that relationships fulfil their moral purposes.

The wife of Wang Zhang provides a particularly clear example. Her admonition was not a rejection of marriage or tradition. It was an appeal to perseverance and responsibility. Her dissent derived its legitimacy from the shared moral purpose of the relationship. Similarly, a mother's influence upon a son who exercised public office demonstrates how moral agency can operate through formation rather than formal political power. This form of agency can be called responsible dissent. It is dissent because it challenges an immediate course of action; it is responsible because it does so in order to restore or fulfil a deeper ethical obligation. Such an understanding also provides a more nuanced way of approaching the relationship between conscience and tradition. Conscience does not always require separation from inherited norms. Sometimes conscience demands a deeper

engagement with them. It asks whether the concrete practice remains faithful to the ethical purpose for which the norm exists. In this sense, the historical examples of Han women suggest an ethico-political imagination in which responsibility is relational. The individual is responsible not only for personal choices but also for the well-being of family, community and society. The mother forms the conscience of the son; the wife counsels the husband; women contribute to the economic stability of the household; and family relationships become part of the larger ordering of society. This relational conception of responsibility differs significantly from both absolute conformity and radical individualism. It opens a third possibility: agency through responsible participation and principled correction.

6. Conclusion

The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" cannot be adequately understood if it is treated simply as a timeless formula of absolute female submission. Its historical development was more complex. The concept emerged from an organic understanding of heaven, earth, yin and yang, and from a social order structured by differentiated responsibilities between men and women. Over time, these distinctions could and did acquire hierarchical meanings, contributing to patriarchal patterns that limited women's equality in political, economic and educational life. Such limitations remain an indispensable part of any responsible historical assessment. Yet the historical evidence from the Han dynasty reveals another dimension that ideological memory can obscure. Women participated actively in family life, economic production, education, marriage, moral formation and, in particular circumstances, political and administrative affairs. They were not merely passive subjects of social norms.

The "Three Obediences" itself contains this ambiguity. Following the father, husband and son certainly establishes a structure of dependence, but the historical record shows that daughters could exercise marital choice, wives could counsel and correct husbands, and mothers could exercise considerable moral authority over adult sons. The "Four Virtues" similarly imposed expectations upon women, yet these expectations included skills

and responsibilities through which women contributed substantially to household and social life. The evidence therefore invites a shift from obedience versus resistance to responsibility, conscience and agency. A woman who advises her husband, forms her son morally, contributes to the economic life of her household or refuses a marriage that violates accepted moral norms is not necessarily rejecting tradition. She may be interpreting and fulfilling its deeper ethical responsibilities.

This observation does not turn Han China into a society of gender equality. Nor does it justify an idealized account of Confucian gender relations. Rather, it reveals the inadequacy of historical interpretations that allow one dimension of the tradition to eclipse all others. The concept of ideological memory helps explain how such simplifications arise. A complex historical formation is remembered through later conceptual binaries, and those binaries can become so familiar that contrary evidence appears anomalous. The task of responsible scholarship is to reopen the historical field so that complexity becomes visible again. Such an approach also illuminates the meaning of conscience in historical interpretation. Conscience requires more than certainty. It requires the willingness to attend to evidence that complicates one's preferred judgment. In the interpretation of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," this means acknowledging both the male-centred hierarchy of the tradition and the real forms of female agency that existed within it.

The most fruitful assertion, therefore, is neither that the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" simply oppressed women nor that they constituted an essentially egalitarian system. The historical evidence points instead to a tradition in which hierarchy, complementarity, responsibility, dependence and agency existed in tension with one another. Seen through this tension, dissent itself acquires a richer meaning. Dissent need not always appear as a rejection of tradition; it can also emerge as an appeal to the deeper obligations that tradition itself recognizes. The wife who admonishes her husband, the mother who forms the conscience of her son, and the woman who exercises responsible choice within marriage illustrate forms of agency that operate from within an inherited ethical order. A responsible

reading of the Han tradition therefore requires neither ideological defence nor ideological condemnation. It requires historical discernment. By recovering the plurality of women's experiences and the ethical agency visible within them, the past can be released from the rigidity of ideological memory. Such a re-reading contributes to an ethico-political imagination in which responsibility is not reduced to conformity and dissent is not reduced to rejection, but both are understood as dimensions of the human search for a just and meaningful social order.

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