

The Ancient Origins of Chinese Traditional Female Gender Role: A Historical Review from Pre-Qin Dynasty to Han Dynasty

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Abstract: There were different courses of gender development in China and the West. Traditional Chinese ethical culture, as the guiding principles in dealing with gender relations, laid the foundation of moral character of men and women, and also caused the formation of the feudal ethics of women in ancient China. This paper discussed the ancient origins of Chinese traditional female gender role in two parts, the first one is the history of establishment of the patriarchy in ancient China, and the second one is the ideological system of the gender relationship. In the second part, this paper focuses on the theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun which was the base of the traditional Chinese gender culture. The theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun regards male and female as a male-centered integrated whole, which was the core and Characteristic of the traditional Chinese gender relationship.

Keywords: Gender relationship, The theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun, He, Men's superiority

When the Western women's liberation movement rose up in the 18th century, the women's liberation ideology was also quietly brewing in the ancient Chinese society. Women all over the world seemed have the same experiences, however, it can be found by the careful comparison that, there were different courses of gender development in China and the West. Traditional Chinese ethical culture, as the guiding principles in dealing with gender relations, laid the foundation of moral character of men and women, and also caused the formation of the feudal ethics of women in ancient China.

1 History: The Natural Foundation of Chinese Traditional Female Gender Role

Before Shang and Zhou dynasties, Chinese people had gone through the matriarchal society, patriarchal society, and finally the slavery society. About matriarchal clan society, the only feature which can be deduced was that "people know their mothers but not fathers". Therefore, there often were some stories of "saint people were born from the nature with no father" in ancient mythologies. For example, Hua Xu bore Fu Xi by stepping on someone's footprint; An Deng bore Shen Nong by dreaming the dragon, etc. Another example can be used to better prove whether female was superior to male, that is, the origin of Chinese surnames regarded female as the center, the right of naming children belonged to women. Besides, the Chinese character "Xing" which refers to "surname" in English, and it has the left side component as female side such as Yao, Si, Ji, Jiang, Ying, etc. All of these surnames show that female was superior to male in the matriarchal society.

In the primitive society with low productivity and poor living conditions, women had the same capacity for subsistence production with men, but they had the monopolistic advantage for reproduction. Therefore, female in matriarchal times enjoyed not only the freedom but even the respect. Respect to female can be easily found in ancient legends, and the most famous female is Nv Wa. As the ancestor of human beings, Nv Wa created human by pinching soil^①, besides, she repaired the sky to protect human from the blood. Just because of her outstanding contribution for the human beings, Nv Wa not only

^① *Feng Su Tong Yi*, written by Ying Shao, said, "As the saying goes, there is no human being in the beginning of the world. Nv Wa created human beings by pinching soil. This work was so heavy and the time was so limited that she swung mud rope to continue. *Shang hai jing* records, "There are ten deities said to be Nv Wa's tharm."

occupied a position in “Three Sovereigns”^①, which are the ancestors of Chinese people as well as the Chinese culture, but she was also the centre of the “Three Sovereigns”. In other words, in “Three Sovereigns” period, Chinese society was still the matriarchal society.

In the matriarchal society, around the lineage, the calculation of descent, production activities, property inheritance, marriage, living systems are based on matrilineal core. According to the expedition of the clan village site of Xi’an Banpo and Lintong Jiangzhai, the matriarchal society implemented the living system separated by gender in one clan, and women still lived with their mothers after marriage. The materials excavated from Yangshao tombs can prove female’s superior position as well. Archaeologists believe that, the fashionable way of funerals were separated funeral by gender and the elaborate funerals for women and young girls. Counting the funerary goods, women’s funerary goods were more than men’s. Take Lintong Jiangzhai tombs for example, the average number of men’s funerary goods is four, while the number of women’s is six. Obviously, in the matriarchal society, the elder, prestigious women were the leading of the clan, the core and backbone of all the clan activities, and the dominator of the society.

With the development of productive forces, the first great social division of labor occurred in the human world, that is, the livestock industry and agriculture were differentiated from hunting and gathering. As a result, women’s dominance in the traditional industry was gradually giving way to men who were good at grazing and cultivation. Therefore, in the production activities of the clan, men began to be dominator, and the lineage gradually transitioned into regarding men as the centre, so patriarchy replaced matriarchy. “The overthrow of matriarchy is the worldwide and historical failure of women.”^② Chinese patrilineal system has been in the bud at the end of matrilineal society. “Three Sovereigns” in Chinese legend, only Nv Wa is female, and the others are all male. Fu xi, a male ancient emperor among the “Three Sovereigns”, invented the fishing net which can be regarded as a proof of the emergence of stockbreeding at that time. Shen Nong, another male ancient emperor among the Three Sovereigns, invented the plow which revealed that the aerial farming appeared. However, in the following five Emperors^③ period, the five emperors are all male. It can be shown that in the five Emperors period the role of women has been depreciated and women have gradually lost their sublime status.

Robbing marriage occurred in the end of matriarchal society. *Yi Zhuan* records, men rob and monopolize the public women by force. There was also mercenary marriage. It may be unlikely that Fu Xi made the deer skin as the betrothal gifts in the ancient legend, but the remains of mercenary marriage can be found in the handed down custom of giving money as gift nowadays. Robbing marriage and mercenary marriage reflect the conflict of private concept with chaos marriage and group marriage. Therefore, monogamy was implemented in the patriarchal society, women became the private property. To put in Engels’s words, “the slavery of men to women” officially began.

It can be seen in the tombs of Dawenkou culture which was the representative patriarchal society that, couple funeral had replaced gender funeral.^④ Besides, the funeral model of Longshan tombs usually is, men laid on the back with unbent limbs, while women laid sideways and leant limbs. There even were tombs with wives and female slaves as sacrificial objects. What’s more, the position of men and women was settled.^⑤ This is the direct performance of women subservient to men. In real life, the general mood of disregarding women has emerged. *Shang Hai Jing• Hai Nei Bei Jing* recorded, in the north there was a dog country, women had to kneel to feed their husbands who were ugly as dog.

After the Five emperors period, Yu erected Xia dynasty, the beginning of China’s slave society as well as

^① Three sovereigns are Nv Wa, Fu Xi, Shen Nong.

^② Friedrich Engels (2003) *The origin of the family, private property and the state*, People’s publishing House, pp.54

^③ Five emperors were Huang Di, Zhuan Yu, Di Ku, Yao, Shun

^④ Institute of Archaeology (1984) *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Archaeological excavation and researches in new China*, Cultural Relics Press, pp.94

^⑤ Institute of Archaeology (1984) *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Archaeological excavation and researches in new China*, Cultural Relics Press, pp.123-124

the beginning of Chinese civilization. The mature of private ownership, the formation of monogamy, and the concentration of social power, brought the strong social motive to the original natural instinct of human's reproduction. "Monogamy was not based on natural conditions but on economic conditions, that is the first family was based on the victory of private ownership to the original natural public ownership. Husband was dominant in the family, as well as, reproduction only belonged to himself, and the property should be inherited only by his children."^①It is the purpose of monogamy. Yu broke the original Abdication and passed his throne to his son Qi, In addition, to protect guarantee the inheritance of power and property, Yu must require blood pureness, and thus, women must be private, women's reproductive function must also be private, and the requirement to women would necessarily follow. Yu opened a new chapter of Chinese history, and he also opened a new page of Chinese women's history. The golden age of women actually gone, the history of being enslave of women actually began.

2 The Ideological Foundation of Chinese Traditional Female Gender Role

2.1 The theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun: the resource of the traditional Chinese gender concept
Men's superior status to women was raised to a philosophical form, which is the theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun. The metaphor of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun can be commonly treated as the conceptual equivalent of the Western conception of femininity and masculinity;^② however, their early forms were not intended to denote any human relations. "Yin-Yang" first appeared as a geographical concept, and with the development of society, was given the different meanings of softness and strength, extending to the metaphor of female and male later. The concept of "Qian-kun", derived from the ancient divination book of *Changes*, was to explain the rules of society. Everything could be divided into two parts, and the two parts would interact and then combine, in this way, the world kept endless. The theory of "Yin-Yang" and "Qian-Kun" just coincided with the view of dualism. Nevertheless, the two contradictory parts must be ordered as primary and secondary, the secondary part should obey to the primary one. Thus, there must be the same order between Yin and Yang, Qian and Kun, as well as male and female. The society should be harmonious and stable with the interaction and combination of these contradictory parts.

It can be easily found in the book of *Changes* that how the concept "Qian-Kun" and "Yin-Yang" was connected with male and female. *Zhouyi-Xici* said, "Qian is the Yang object, Kun is the Yin object" "The rule of Qian become male and the rule of Kun become female". Besides, the key is that, the characteristics, value and status of Qian-Kun and Yin-Yang were also transferred to the human beings. In the book of *Changes*, the key words of Qian were Zun, Gao, Gui, gang which means distinguished, honorable, valued and strong, while the key words of Kun were Bei, Jian, Rou and Shun which means humble, weak and submissive. Obviously, men and women respectively inherited these key words of Qian and Kun. In addition, this connection implied that men's superior status was the nature rule, the rulers deduced the natural laws as the social laws, emphasized the social order rather than the natural attributes, that's why the patriarchy seemed justifiably as well as unbreakable during the long feudal period.

Except for determining the different characteristics and status of male and female, another important concept of the theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun is "integration" into an organic whole. Men and women, especially husband and wife, should embed and integrate with each other. The "integration" of Yin and Yang means the harmoniousness based on the ethical order. First of all, Yin and Yang were indispensable and complementary for the development of the world; things could not improve without either of them. Male and female should integrate into the organic whole to make the real harmoniousness. Second, the interaction of Yin-Yan and male-female existed not only in the division of

^① Friedrich Engels (2003) *The origin of the family, private property and the state*, People's publishing House, pp.62

^② Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) *Confucianism and Women: A philosophical interpretation*, State University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 48

work but also the characteristics. In the respect of work, men mainly worked outside and women did housework complementarily; in the respect of characteristics, men were always strong while women were relative weak. Both should complement each other in order to achieve neutralization and harmoniousness. Third, the “integration” of male and female actually meant the integration regarding the obedience of female to male as the precondition. “Wife is the woman linked to the men.” That is, the wife joint into the male-centered integration as a whole and the wife always stood at the dominated position. It is shown that this kind of “complementarity” and “integration” had established on the basis of advocating Qian and Yang but restricting Kun and Yin. It is said in *Yizhuan* that “to visualize is Qian, to follow is Kun”, which indicated Qian was the principal part of visualizing and ruling while Kun is the passive and following part. As a result, the nature of the integration was Yang dominating Yin, and in fact, the harmoniousness of Yin and Yang depended on sacrificing the interests of Yin.

2.2 *Chun Qiu Fan Lu* and *Bai Hu Tong Yi*: the development of the traditional Chinese gender concept

According to “he”, the core of the theory of Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun, the integration of male and female became the special aspect of the traditional Chinese gender concept. As the narrative, “he” was based on women’s obedience to men. In the establishment of patriarchal society, obedience is firstly necessary for female, Men and women never belong to the same class whether in the traditional or modern era of Chinese society. As cultural value, “men rate women, women obey men, and it starts the meaning of couple. Women must be compliant, obey father and elder brother as a daughter, obey husband as a wife, with the sons in widowhood.”^① The concept “obey” gives the justice to the predominant right of men. “Women have the moralities of three obediences without special favor.”^② built the gender relations of male and female, master and slave, up and down. By the way of social controlling (etiquette, education, marriage, etc) men has acquired the monopolized advantage to determine the women’s humble and backbreaking role, which points out that women’s achievements must be in the hand of services for men. Besides, in order to ensure the purity of blood and thus to ensure the inheritance of property and power, chastity is also the regulation female should comply with. Whether the feudal ethics was harsh or lenient, the requirements of Zhen (chastity) and Shun (obedience) were actually integrated and essential. It seems that during the feudal history of China, in the beginning of female’s virtue, Shun (obedience) was thought more highly than Zhen (chastity). It is because that, before the hierarchal concept and order fully rooting in the society, the social ranking and order must be principally emphasized. In other words, the stress on Shun (obedience) actually implied the emphasis on the order of society and human relations.

The rites of Zhou dynasty had established the Chinese rule and culture system, and its core was hierarchy. The rites of Zhou clearly indicated that female belonged to her patriarchal family and male family member. In detail, female should obey to her father when unmarried and obey to her husband after married. In the patriarchal society, the sole fate of female was to be the wife. The status of the married female depended on her husband; women were respected usually because of their husbands or children. However, these provisions were not systematic yet.

The subsequent Confucianism had filled the vacancy quickly. Confucianism holds a contradictory attitude to the status of women. Based on the affirmation and maintenance of patriarchal, Confucianism inherited the gender system established by the Zhou Dynasty, which is men’s superiority to women and men’s domination to women. Starting from the philosophical concepts of yin and yang, Confucianism claimed the male superiority and the female humbleness, and from which derived the concept of “women disaster”. Nevertheless, at the same time, Confucianism rectified this concept ethically and affirmed women’s status in marriage and family, that is, wife was equal to husband, husband should respect wife; mother shared the same respects with father. To a certain extent, these concepts

^① *Yi Li: Sang Fu-Zi Xia Zhuan.*

^② *Yi Li: Sang Fu-Zi Xia Zhuan.*

emphasized the equal status between couple.

Until the Han dynasty, the “he” of men and women had formed preliminary. Confucianism of Han Dynasty had maintained the attention to the human ethics of Confucianism of Pre-Qin and evidently strengthened the depreciation to women. Confucianism of Han mostly made a far-fetched comparison with nature law and human law and applied the theory of Yin-Yang to the male superiority.

Dong zhongshu regarded the relationship between emperor and minister, father and son, husband and wife as the “three cardinal guides of the kingcraft”^①, which resulted in the politicalization of the ethic of couples. Integration of ethics and politics was the distinguish feature of Confucianism, but the emphasis on family ethics and social order in Pre-Qin period was opposite to that in Han Dynasty. Pre-Qin Confucians argued, only the stability of family can lead to the orderly society, thereby strengthening of the regime. In this way, the family ethic was connected with the order of the country and society. That is, the relationship of couples was the “beginning of the human ethics, the basis of the kingcraft.” preceding the relationships between father and son, emperor and minister. The “three cardinal guides” had changed this order. On the one hand, centralization would inevitably lead to strengthening of feudal rites further exacerbating the gender repression. On the other hand, the relationship of couples was politicalized as the relation of domination and being dominated. Although the Pre-Qin Confucianism asserted the inequity between husband and wife, it still promoted respect of husband for wife. However, “fu wei qi gang” ulteriorly depressed the status of women, the fate of women was controlled and mastered in the hands of men. Furthermore, Dong Zhongshu reversed the ethical order of the husband and wife, father and son, emperor and minister, to make the relationship of emperor and minister on the first place, while the “beginning of human ethics” of couple ethic the last one.

In Dong Zhongshu’s view, the ethic of couples should also obey the law of Yin and Yang, “the Yin and Yang of universe are male and female, the male and female of human are Yin and Yang”^②; the Yin and Yang can also be regarded as male and female, the male and female can also be regarded as Yin and Yang^③; “the law of men and women follows the law of Yin and Yang”^④. However, “the universe allows men but no women”^⑤, therefore, “Yang is the dominating husband and Yin is the ministrant wife”^⑥. Besides, all the badness belong to Yin, all the goodness belong to Yang^⑦, as a result, “Yang is noble while Yin is humble, that is the universal system.”^⑧ Dong Zhongshu also pointed out that “all men are Yang though humble, while all women are Yin though noble”. As a result, “male is noble Yin and female is humble Yang” became the undoubted order. Wife should unconditionally obey her husband without treason or defy. If “wife disobeying her husband will be punished”^⑨

Bai Hu Tong Yi, written by Ban Gu, asked more for rights of husband, and depreciated female’s status more absolutely. The femininity of *Bai Hu Tong Yi* concentrated on the regulation of the ethics between husband and wife. It regarded the relationship between husband and wife as the beginning of the human ethics. Meanwhile, it also focused on discussion of husband superiority, integration of couples, as well as loyal marriage.

There are two specific principles of husband superiority and wife inferiority: “Once married, never change” and “women means obedience and service.” The former means that women could not remarry but unconditionally obey, even if their husbands behaved vilely. The later deepened the absolute

^① *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Ji Yi*.

^② *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Xun Tian Zhi Dao*.

^③ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Xun Tian Zhi Dao*.

^④ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Ji Yi*.

^⑤ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Yin Yang Wei*.

^⑥ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Ji Yi*.

^⑦ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Yang Zun Yin Bei*.

^⑧ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Tian Bian Zai Ren*.

^⑨ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Yang Zun Yin Bei*.

^⑩ *Chun Qiu Fan Lu-Shun Ming*.

obedience and inferiority of women. *Bai Hu Tong Yi* advanced “three obediences” of women: “Women should obey. Obeying to parents when unmarried, obeying to husbands when married, obeying to sons when widowed.” No matter what, the only thing women should do was to strictly obey feminine virtue. Over time, women had lost their independence and rebellious spirit. They regarded every thing as nature, which then would be internalized into habits and characters.

The integration of couples was reflected in the following aspects: first, sharing glory and shame. However, at many times, the wife shared their husbands’ social status and reputation without their own independent status and reputation. For most women, even their names were not necessary. They were called someone’s daughter when unmarried, and called someone’s wife after married. The husband shared their wives’ honor mainly because of the virtues of their wives. Vice versa, couples should bear the same shame. So they would conceal the evildoing of each other by a variety of ways. Second, be buried together after death. Couples should be buried together rather than separated after the death. However, buried together did not simply mean one was buried together with another one, it meant “the wife was buried accompanied with her husband” Even the wife died before her husband, her old coffin should be moved into her husband’s new grave after her husband died, to indicate her intention of “obeying to the husband” in her lifetime.

3 Conclusion

The key of women’s status was humbleness, and the core of women’s role was obedience. Of course, the traditional Chinese femininity had many aspects; however, women’s humbleness and obedience were the premise. In Chinese femininity, they had the special source and characteristics. Today, Chinese women are the half sky of the society, the modern women have undergone significant changes because of the idea of gender equality deeply in mind, from a deep-rooted traditional concept of view, they are still affected by the age-old stereotypes of the feudal society. Those laggard traditions are now unrefined but still dominate people’s awareness about the women’s words and deed, impact and restrict the development of women strongly. Therefore, it deserves further study of women’s historical image, status and role in cultural perspective. Sorting out the evolution of women’s ethics in ancient China can be easy to understand the basic meaning of the Chinese traditional ethics of women.^① It not only has profound significance on academic, but also on the reference to the history.

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