CHINA: “MOTHER OF MENCIUS” AND BAN ZHAO

Chinese authors paid considerable attention to women during the Han dynasty. The following three selections show various facets of patriarchal beliefs: the devoted mother, a bad wife, and a standard statement of women's characteristics and duties. Do they fit together consistently? The first selection is from *Biographies of Heroic Women* written by the eminent scholar Liu Xiang in about 79–78 B.C.E. Mencius was a Confucian philosopher who lived from about 372 to 289 B.C.E. and who was widely revered. Because he was left fatherless, his mother played a great role in raising him, and the stories about her provide standard examples of maternal ideals. The second selection is from the most famous Han text on women's virtue, by Ban Zhao (ca. 45–116 C.E.); she was a prominent woman scholar whose own life would seem to contradict the values she preached.

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THE MOTHER OF MENCIUS

The mother of Mencius lived in Zou in a house near a cemetery. When Mencius was a little boy he liked to play burial rituals in the cemetery, happily building tombs and grave mounds. His mother said to herself, “This is no place to bring up my son.”

She moved near the marketplace in town. Mencius then played merchant games of buying and selling. His mother again said, “This is no place to bring up my son.”

So once again she moved, this time next to a school house. Mencius then played games of ancestor sacrifices and practiced the common courtesies between students and teachers. His mother said, “At last, this is the right place for my son!” There they remained.

When Mencius grew up he studied the six arts of propriety, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics. Later he became a famous Confucian scholar. Superior men commented that Mencius’s mother knew the right influences for her sons. The *Book of Songs* says, “That admirable lady, what will she do for them!”

When Mencius was young, he came home from school one day and found his mother was weaving at the loom. She asked him, “Is school out already?”

He replied, “I left because I felt like it.”

His mother took her knife and cut the finished cloth on her loom. Mencius was startled and asked why. She replied, “Your neglecting your studies is very much like my cutting the cloth. The superior person studies to establish a reputation and gain wide knowledge. He is calm and poised and tries to do no wrong. If you do not study now, you will surely end up as a menial servant and will never be free from troubles. It would be just like a woman who supports herself by weaving to give it up. How long could such a person depend on her husband and son to stave off hunger? If a woman neglects her work or a man gives up the cultivation of his character, they may end up as common thieves if not slaves!”
Shaken, from then on Mencius studied hard from morning to night. He studied the philosophy of the master and eventually became a famous Confucian scholar. Superior men observed that Mencius’s mother understood the way of motherhood. The Book of Songs says, “That admirable lady, what will she tell them!”

After Mencius was married, one day as he was going into his private quarters, he encountered his wife not fully dressed. Displeased, Mencius stopped going into his wife’s room. She then went to his mother, begged to be sent home, and said, “I have heard that the etiquette between a man and a woman does not apply in their private room. But lately I have been too casual, and when my husband saw me improperly dressed, he was displeased. He is treating me like a stranger. It is not right for a woman to live as a guest; therefore, please send me back to my parents.”

Mencius’s mother called him to her and said, “It is polite to inquire before you enter a room. You should make some loud noise to warn anyone inside, and as you enter, you should keep your eyes low so that you will not embarrass anyone. Now, you have not behaved properly, yet you are quick to blame others for their impropriety. Isn’t that going a little too far?”

Mencius apologized and took back his wife. Superior men said that his mother understood the way to be a mother-in-law.

When Mencius was living in Qi, he was feeling very depressed. His mother saw this and asked him, “Why are you looking so low?”

Mencius answered, “I have heard that the superior man judges his capabilities and then accepts a position… Today my ideas are not being used in Qi, so I wish to go somewhere else. But I am worried because you are getting too old to travel about the country.”

His mother answered, “A woman’s duties are to cook the five grains, heat the wine, look after her parents-in-law, make clothes, and that is all! Therefore, she cultivates the skills required in the women’s quarters and has no ambition to manage affairs outside of the house. The Book of Changes says, ‘In her central place, she attends to the preparation of the food.’ The Book of Songs says, ‘It will be theirs neither to do wrong nor to do good, / Only about the spirits and the food will they have to think.’ This means that a woman’s duty is not to control or to take charge. Instead she must follow the ‘three submissions.’ When she is young, she must submit to her parents. After her marriage, she must submit to her husband. When she is widowed, she must submit to her son. These are the rules of propriety. Now you are an adult and I am old; therefore, whether you go depends on what you consider right, whether I follow depends on the rules of propriety.”

Superior men observed that Mencius’s mother knew the proper course for women. The Book of Songs says, “Serenely she looks and smiles, / Without any impatience she delivers her instructions.”
BAN ZHAO'S ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN

Humility

In ancient times, on the third day after a girl was born, people placed her at the base of the bed, gave her a shard to play with, and made a sacrifice to announce her birth. She was put below the bed to show that she was lowly and weak and should concentrate on humbling herself before others. Playing with a shard showed that she should get accustomed to hard work and concentrate on being diligent. Announcing her birth to the ancestors showed that she should focus on continuing the sacrifices. These three customs convey the unchanging path for women and the ritual traditions.

Humility means yielding and acting respectful, putting others first and oneself last, never mentioning one's own good deeds or denying one's own faults, enduring insults and bearing with mistreatment, all with due trepidation. Industriousness means going to bed late, getting up early, never shirking work morning or night, never refusing to take on domestic work, and completing everything that needs to be done neatly and carefully. Continuing the sacrifices means serving one's husband-master with appropriate demeanor, keeping oneself clean and pure, never joking or laughing, and preparing pure food and drink to offer to the ancestors.

There has never been a woman who had these three traits and yet ruined her reputation or fell into disgrace. If a woman loses these three traits, she will have no name to preserve and will not be able to avoid shame.

Devotion

According to the rites, a man is obligated to take a second wife but nothing is written about a woman marrying twice. Hence the saying, "A husband is one's Heaven; one cannot flee Heaven; one cannot leave a husband." Heaven punishes those whose actions offend the spirits; a husband looks down on a wife who violates the rites and proprieties. Thus the Model for Women says, "To please one man is her goal; to displease one man ends her goal." It follows from this that a woman must seek her husband's love—not through such means as flattery, flirting, or false intimacy, but rather through devotion.

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. If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, then the proper relationship (between men and women) and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed. As a matter of fact the purpose of these two (the controlling of women by men, and the serving of men by women) is the same.

Now examine the gentlemen of the present age. They only know that wives must be controlled, and that the husband's rules of conduct manifesting his authority must be established. They therefore teach their boys to read books and (study) histories. But they do not in the least understand that husbands and masters must (also) be served, and that the proper relationship and the rites should be maintained.

Yet only to teach men and not to teach women,—is that not ignoring the essential relation between them? According to the "Rites," it is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years, and by the age of fifteen years they ought then to be ready for cultural training. Only why should it not be (that girls' education as well as boys' be) according to this principle? . . . As Yin and Yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the Yang is rigidity; the function of the Yin is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a
woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness. Hence there arose the common saying: "A man though born like a wolf may, it is feared, become a weak monstrosity; a woman though born like a mouse may, it is feared, become a tiger."

Now for self-culture nothing equals respect for others. To counteract firmness nothing equals compliance. Consequently it can be said that the Way of respect and acquiescence is woman's most important principle of conduct. So respect may be defined as nothing other than holding on to that which is permanent; and acquiescence nothing other than being liberal and generous. Those who are steadfast in devotion know that they should stay in their proper places; those who are liberal and generous esteem others, and honor and serve (them).

If husband and wife have the habit of staying together, never leaving one another, and following each other around within the limited space of their own rooms, then they will lust after and take liberties with one another. From such action improper language will arise between the two. This kind of discussion may lead to licentiousness. Out of licentiousness will be born a heart of disrespect to the husband. Such a result comes from not knowing that one should stay in one's proper place.

Furthermore, affairs may be either crooked or straight; words may be either right or wrong. Straightforwardness cannot but lead to quarreling; crookedness cannot but lead to accusation. If there are really accusations and quarrels, then undoubtedly there will be angry affairs. Such a result comes from not esteeming others, and not honoring and serving (them).

(If wives) suppress not contempt for husbands, then it follows (that such wives) rebuke and scold (their husbands). (If husbands) stop not short of anger, then they are certain to beat (their wives). The correct relationship between husband and wife is based upon harmony and intimacy, and (conjugal) love is grounded in proper union. Should actual blows be dealt, how could matrimonial relationship be preserved? Should sharp words be spoken, how could (conjugal) love exist? If love and proper relationship both be destroyed, then husband and wife are divided.