

Women on the Threshold in the First Chapter of Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan*: The Gendered Concepts of *Nei* 内/*Wai* 外 and the Way of Women (*Fu Dao* 婦道)

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Abstract

Enquiring into the first chapter of Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳, this paper points out the consolidation of the spatial distinction of *nei/wai* and the ethical construction of *womanhood* in the Former Han period. In this analysis we will underline the “in-between” position of women depicted by the author and consider their position as based on a metaphorical—but sometimes even physical—threshold. It highlights six categories in Liu Xiang's work that help us understand a traditional vision of woman that is reviving in modern times. Even today, the Way of Women (*fu dao* 婦道) is one of the principles on which social harmony is based; breaching the Way of Woman leads to disruptive consequences both within the family and outside, within society.

Keywords: Womanhood, Confucian ethics, *Lienü Zhuan*, Liu Xiang

Ženske na pragu v prvem poglavju Liu Xiangove knjige *Lienü Zhuan*: spolno opredeljeni koncepti *nei* 内/*wai* 外 in pot žensk (*Fu Dao* 婦道)

Izvilleček

Avtorica na osnovi preučevanja prvega poglavja Liu Xiangove knjige *Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳 (*Biografije zglednih žensk*) obravnava konsolidacijo prostorskega razlikovanja med *nei* in *wai* ter etično konstrukcijo ženskosti v obdobju dinastije Zahodni Han. Poudari položaj žensk »v in med« ter ga obravnava na osnovi metaforičnega – včasih celo fizičnega – praga. Članek nadalje osvetli šest kategorij v Liu Xiangovi knjigi. Te pripomorejo k razumevanju tradicionalnega pogleda na ženske, ki se ponovno oživlja v sodobnem času. Tudi danes je namreč pot ženske *fu dao* 婦道 eno osnovnih načel, na katerem temelji družbena harmonija, kršitev te poti pa vodi k motečim posledicam tako v družini kot v širši družbi.

Ključne besede: ženskost, konfucijanska etika, *Lienü Zhuan*, Liu Xiang

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Introduction

This paper focuses on ethical differences between men and women in the specific textual tradition of Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳. The theory underlining the study is that the social ethical discourse built on the concept of “moral personhood”, starting from at least the Western Han *Xi Han* 西漢 dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), is based on a principle of inequality.

More specifically, the social construct of *womanhood*, based on total subordination to men, is embodied in the Confucian prescription of the *san cong si de* 三從四德—Three Obediences and Four Virtues—and in the idealized figure of daughter, wife and mother, belonging not only to Confucian scholarly tradition, but to a complex cultural heritage deriving from a stratified tradition disseminated through different channels and coming from multiple directions. As stated by Elizabeth Croll (1995, 2): “In China the rhetoric of both equality and inequality were derived from a set of well-known texts, which were reiterated time and again. ... text was translated into the oral *via* folk adage, homily and story.”

The Han 漢 (202 BCE–220 CE) re-collection and re-interpretation of pre-Han traditions on woman as a social construct pursued an ideal and subjugated *womanhood*, centred mainly on the Confucian *literati* school. Within this tradition, the emphasis on intra-familial roles, the social position “inside” the household and performative chores, are the frameworks that shape the idealized ethical *wifehood* and *motherhood* (Evans 2002) that have been transmitted throughout the centuries, until the modern era. It is commonly stated that classical texts, from the Han dynasty onwards, emphasized the social role of woman as a wife and a mother. Women, as mothers and wives, had the function of educating children, both for material and moral life, and guiding their husbands in their social roles. Even in modern times, the maintenance of social harmony is based on this Way of Women (*fu dao* 婦道), and breaching it has disruptive consequences both within the family and outside, within society (Lieberman 1998; Ebrey 2002; Barlow 2004; Rosenlee 2006; Hershatter 2007).

Following these statements, in this paper we enquire into the classical texts in order to answer the following questions:

1. Has the gendered social *womanhood* always been represented as that of a “subordinate subject”, or are there examples of women occupying more active roles, more prominent positions in Chinese society?
2. Is it plausible to point out an “in-between” position of women construct in classical texts?
3. Can Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan* be considered a key text in the shaping of the “woman on the threshold”?

Method

The main texts we are examining, beside Liu Xiang's 刘向 (79–8 BCE) *Exemplary Women's Biography* (*Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳),¹ are classical and ideological sources which the historian drew from for the compilation of this work. The 104 women Liu Xiang described in the book come from mythological sources, historical accounts, popular traditions, and philosophical concepts that at that time were moving towards a crystallization of the idea of a gendered *ren* 人 as a social construct grounded on an ethical base.²

In order to analyse the social pattern of ideal *womanhood* we focused on six main topics that are embodied by the different women depicted by Liu Xiang:

1. The gendered concepts of *nei* 内 and *wai* 外: women on the threshold
2. The mother: “my kin” *vs.* “your kin”
3. The relation with in-laws and the role of peacekeeping within the family and outside
4. Daily life: warp and loom as a symbol of morality in the narrative of women
5. Daily life: pregnancy and foetal education
6. Daily life: death and mourning

The Author and the Work

The *Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳³ written by Liu Xiang 刘向 is the first literary collection of biographies especially focused on women. Liu Xiang was the *literatus* who in 26 BCE had been appointed by Emperor Han Cheng Di to work on the recovery of the books lost in Qin Shihuangdi's burning of books in 213 BCE. The *LNZ* initiated the *lienü* 列女 (“exemplary women”) historical tradition as a part of the official dynastic history; it stated the necessity of recording the “Biographies

1 Henceforth *LNZ*. Kinney (2014) provides an integral English translation of Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan*. An Italian complete translation by Carmen Coduti was released in 2008 by ISIAO—Collana “Il Nuovo Ramusio”. A comprehensive bio-bibliography of Liu Xiang was published by Riccardo Fracasso in 2008.

2 In pre-modern China, women do not have a position prior to or beyond familial relations. They are conceived within the hierarchical kinship/social ritualized dimension. To borrow Angela Zito's and Tani Barlow's words, “The *fu* exists within the kin world of reciprocal inequality” (Zito and Barlow 1991, 260).

3 Quotations from the original text come from <https://ctext.org/lie-nv-zhuan/zh>. Therefore, page numbers are not provided, but the line numbers are reported. Integral original versions, with images of original editions and source texts of the *LNZ* as well as of *Zuozhuan*, and others mentioned here, are hosted in Kinney's website *Traditions of Exemplary Women*. <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/xwomen/intro.html>. Accessed November 8, 2019.

of Women” sections in the dynastic histories, from the *Hou Han Shu* 後漢書, of which it was a part, to the *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書, to the Historical Annals until the Republican Period. According to Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) in the *Han Shu*, the main aim of Liu Xiang’s book was that of instructing the Emperor (Mou 2004, 9–10).

The original text, known as *Gu Lienü Zhuan* 古列女傳, is divided into seven books, each one (except the first, the first chapter of which is missing) reporting fifteen cases of women standing as examples of virtuous or evil conduct. An additional 8th chapter is included in the extended version known as *Xu Lienü Zhuan* 續列女傳. All of these collect 104 biographies of women of different social statuses, from peasants to imperial wives, dating from the mythological emperors to the Spring and Autumn Period (770–5 BCE).

The first six books depict positive virtuous models, whereas the last reports examples of evil and parasitic women who can harm the family and the state. Together they provide the earliest categories of Confucian moral values with regard to women:

1. 母儀傳 *Muyi* (Maternal Rectitude)
2. 賢明傳 *Xianming* (Enlightenment and Intelligence)
3. 仁智傳 *Renzhi* (Benevolence and Wisdom)
4. 貞順傳 *Zhenshun* (Purity and Deference)
5. 節義傳 *Jieyi* (Chastity and Righteousness)
6. 辯通傳 *Biantong* (Skill in Argumentation)
7. 孽嬖傳 *Niebi* (Evil and Parasitic)

The earliest introduction and annotated version of the *Gu Lienü Zhuan* was written by the hand of Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–117 CE), the first known female historian, who, together with her brother Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) and father Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54 CE), wrote the official dynastic history of the Former Han, the *Han Shu* 漢書. She is also the author of the first book of instructions for women, the *Nüjie* 女戒.⁴

According to Chen Dongyuan ([1937] 1988, 45), we may consider the *LNZ*, together with Ban Zhao’s *Nüjie*, the oldest books on the ethical foundations for women. He considers Liu Xiang and Ban Zhao’s theorization on women as an internal construction of *Lifa* 禮法, the Confucian system.

4 Original version in Chen, Wang, and Zhang 1992, 4–18.

The ideological aim of the text was that of constructing the social categories of gendered moral personhood.

The First Book: Maternal Models

In the Chinese classical ethical system, the woman subject is defined inside a kinship relation. Rosanlee (2006, 5) suggests that “the process of ritualization within the kinship system coincides with the process of genderization”. And moreover: “Familial, kinship roles are the focus point in the discussion of gender” (ibid., 47).

This is the reason why the starting point of our analysis is the description of “maternal models”. The first book of the *LNZ*, “Maternal models” (*Muyi* 母儀), contains fourteen accounts of women who are taken as positive examples of a “virtuous mother”.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. 有虞二妃 <i>Youyu erfei</i> | The two wives of Youyu. |
| 2. 棄母姜嫄 <i>Qi mu Jiang Yuan</i> | Jiang Yuan, mother of Qi. |
| 3. 契母簡狄 <i>Xie mu Jian di</i> | Jian Di, mother of Xie. |
| 4. 啟母塗山 <i>Qi mu Tushan</i> | Tushan, mother of Qi. |
| 5. 湯妃有嬖 <i>Tang fei Youshen</i> | Youshen, wife of Tang. |
| 6. 周室三母 <i>Zhoushi san mu</i> | The three mothers of the House of Zhou. |
| 7. 衛姑定姜 <i>Wei gu Ding Jiang</i> | Ding Jiang, the Lady of Wei. |
| 8. 齊女傅母 <i>Qi nü bomu</i> | The tutor of the woman of Qi. |
| 9. 魯季敬姜 <i>Lu Ji Jing Jiang</i> | Jing Jiang, of the Ji lineage of Lu. |
| 10. 楚子發母 <i>Chu Zifa mu</i> | The mother of Zifa of Chu. |
| 11. 鄒孟軻母 <i>Zou Mengke mu</i> | The mother of Mengke of Zou. |
| 12. 魯之母師 <i>Lu zhi mu shi</i> | The mother instructor of Lu. |
| 13. 魏芒慈母 <i>Wei Mang zi mu</i> | The benevolent mother of Mang of Wei. |
| 14. 齊田稷母 <i>Qi Tianji mu</i> | The mother of Tianji of Qi. |

Among these women there are mothers of deities (Jiang Yuan 姜嫄, Jian Di 簡狄, and Tushan 塗山) coming from the mythological tradition, empresses, concubines and common people, such as Mencius’s mother (*Zou Mengke mu* 鄒孟軻母).

In the following section we will highlight the six conceptual categories we identify in the fourteen accounts.

The Categories

We will analyse how Liu Xiang is shaping a new genderized *womanhood*, in line with the traditional discourse on women, while keeping an open door to women on the threshold.

(1) Women beyond the *nei* and the Importance of the Threshold

In the 12th chapter of *Liji* 禮記, *Neize* 內則 (NZ), the separation of *nei/wai* (inside/outside) is stated in the following terms:

Men stay on the outside, women on the inside.

男子居外，女子居內。(NZ, 57)

Likewise, the spatial separation of the sexes is thus defined:

At seven, boys and girls do not sit at the same table, do not eat together.

七年，男女不同席，不共食。(NZ, 77)

In the accounts in the first chapter of Liu Xiang's work, the concept *nei* appears 19 times in reference to women; this indicates how the *nei/wai* dichotomy becomes fundamental to Liu Xiang's ethical discourse.

The first occurrence we observe here is that in the episode of Jing Jiang, of the Ji lineage of Lu (No. 9 *Lu Ji Jing Jiang* 魯季敬姜). She instructs us on the difference between *nei* 內, the "inside", translated here as "the inner quarters", and the *wai* 外 the "outside", or the "public life".

Jing Jiang is talking to Kangzi, a Minister of Lu, related to her by marriage (she was his paternal great-aunt). It is worth noting that during this dialogue she is standing inside and he outside the door, thus the threshold becomes a border that neither one is allowed to cross:

"Haven't you ever heard these words? The Son of Heaven and his noble men administrate public affairs at court; from high rank officials to low rank officials, they all administrate their duties in the outer chambers, and

the domestic affairs in the inner chambers. Beyond the inner chambers, women decide their own works. Superiors and inferiors are all alike (in this respect). The outer court is where you carry on the duties assigned by the ruler, the inner court is where you manage the affairs of the Ji lineage, I wouldn't dare say anything about either of them." When Kangzi arrived, she opened the door, and told him these words, neither one trespassing the threshold.

子不聞耶？天子及諸侯合民事於內朝，自卿大夫以下合官職於外朝，合家事於內朝，寢門之內，婦人治其職焉。上下同之。夫外朝子將業君之官職焉，內朝子將庀季氏之政焉，皆非吾所敢言也。康子嘗至敬姜，闔門而與之言，皆不踰闕。(LNZ 1,9,13)

Jing Jiang draws the line between the two realms: she states the rules of *fu dao* 婦道 (the Way of Women) talking from inside beyond the threshold, acting as a link between the two worlds. This threshold makes her step in and out, and in fact represents her knowledge.

Jing Jiang is wife, mother, mother-in-law, and counsellor of generals, and she also marks the line of the threshold: she is an active subject with a positive influence in society, bringing about change for the better.

In the episode of the Three Mothers of the House of Zhou (No. 6 *Zhoushi san mu* 周室三母), speaking about Tai Si, mother of Wen, the author tells us that:

King Wen rules the *wai*, the outside; the Mother of Wen (Tai Si) rules the *nei*, the inside.

文王治外，文母治內。(LNZ 1,6,5)

This is a very sharp statement. Liu Xiang had just specified that she knew the "Way of Women", thus stating an inherent relation between *nei/wai* separation and the *fu dao*:

Entering the country, Tai Si took good care of Tai Jiang and Tai Ren,⁵ from dawn to dusk engaged in diligent work, to pursue the right Way of Women.

及入，太姒思媚大姜、太任，旦夕勤勞，以進婦道。(ibid.)

5 The other two mothers in the court are described as follows: Tai Jiang was the mother of Wang Ji, she was able to guide, and was good at moral teachings; Tai Ren was Wang Ji's wife and King Wen's mother, and she was good at the pre-natal education of the children. Tai Si was King Wen's wife the mother of King Wu, and she was called "cultured mother".

Mencius' mother (No. 11) also traces a very strong line on *nei/wai* boundaries:

The mother of Mencius said: "A woman's *li* is to cook five cereals, to make wine with fermented rice, to take good care of her husband's parents, to weave clothes and garments. Thus, she has to regulate the inner chambers, but she doesn't have to think about the outside."

孟母曰：「夫婦人之禮，精五飯，審酒漿，養舅姑，縫衣裳而已矣。故有閨內之脩，而無境外之志。(LNZ 1,11,8)

In the final sentence, we read:

The nobleman says that the mother of Mencius knows the "Way of Women" (*fu dao*).

君子謂孟母知婦道。(ibid.)

The physical separation between the realms of *nei* and *wai* is the first rule in the construction of the *fu dao* 婦道.

It is in the *Zuozhuan* (ZZ)⁶ that we find the distinction between *nan/nü* as coincident with the spatial collocation in the *wai/nei*: women belong to the "inside" (*nei* 內), that is the domestic area of competence, clearly mapped with material references.

Here is the example of the ladies Mi and Jiang, the wives of Wen, Earl of Zheng in the *Zuozhuan*:

In the morning of *bingzi*, the ladies Mi and Jiang, the wives of Wen, Earl of Zheng, went to congratulate the Viscount of Chu at the marsh of Ke, when the Viscount made the bandmaster Jin display to them the captives and the ears of the slain. The noble man says that this is contrary to *li*. A woman, when escorting or meeting a visitor, *does not go beyond the gate*; when seeing her brothers, *she does not cross the threshold*. The business of war does not involve women.

丙子晨，鄭文夫人芊氏，姜氏，勞楚子於柯澤，楚子使師縉示之俘馘，君子曰，非禮也。婦人送迎不出門，見兄弟不踰闕。戎事不邇女器。(ZZ, Duke Xi, Year 22)

6 The *Zuozhuan* is a collection of narratives in the form of a commentary to the stories in the Spring and Autumn Annals *Chungiu* 春秋. It was written in the fourth century BCE and, like the *Shijing*, is considered the earliest literary appearance of woman as a social construct (Mair 2001, 196; Rosenlee 2006, 97). "The general purpose of the *Zuozhuan* is to demonstrate the normative patterns of human conduct on a grand historical canvas." (See also Goldin in Wang 2003, 73)

A very important step in the construction of the ethics of *womanhood* is represented by the work of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE). He, as revitalizer of Confucianism from a holistic perspective, categorized the five relations of the social hierarchy (*wulun* 無倫) as father-son, ruler-minister, husband-wife, big brother-little brother, and friend-friend. In the cosmic order that corresponds to the natural interaction between Heaven (*Tian* 天) and Mankind (*Ren* 人), every subject has its own proper space. Dong Zhongshu thought that the forces of *Yin* and *Yang* regulated the relation between genders, and thus assigned *Yin*/woman, to the inside—*nei* 內—and *Yang*/man, to the outside—*wai* 外.

While putting women in the *nei*, and men in the *wai*, the *LNZ* gives life to an intermediate position: that of the woman located “on the threshold”; women that, thanks to their knowledge, can advise, change, and have an active role in their realm, thus directly or indirectly influencing the outside. Standing on the threshold, good mothers and wives act as sage counsellors for their sons or husbands, no matter their age or rank. The mother of Zifa of Chu (No 10.: *Chu Zifa mu* 楚子發母) scolded her son, a general, for being too proud and selfish in directing his soldiers:

Today, you, my son, are the general; while troops and officers share raw cereal to eat, from morning to dawn you keep meat and high quality cereals all for yourself, how can it be? ... My son is not my son, I won't let him in my house!

今子為將，士卒并分菽粒而食之，子獨朝夕芻豢黍粱，何也？……子非吾子也，無入吾門。(LNZ 1,10,2)

Order is restored only after the son has begged for his mother's forgiveness.

Zifa asked for mother's forgiveness, so she let him in.

子發於是謝其母，然後內之。(LNZ 1,10,3)

In the final statement, the comment says:

The nobleman says that Zifa's mother is good indeed at teaching.

君子謂子發母能以教誨。(ibid.)

The moral lesson, here, seems to address mankind as a whole, the ethical *ren*, and not only the woman or her son. In reality, she is also a “woman on the threshold”, standing on a position between *nei* and *wai*.

In another case, the mother of Tian Ji of Qi (No. 14 *Qi Tianji mu* 齊田稷母) gave her son a powerful lesson. Tian Ji was prime minister in Qi, but he was corrupt.

When his mother asked him, he admitted that he had accepted money from lower functionaries. Hearing this, she got very angry and reprimanded him:

... For an official to serve the king is as for a son to serve the father. He uses all his strength, all his capacity to show his loyalty and faithfulness to the king, without deceiving; he follows orders at the cost of his own life; he is incorruptible and just—this will avoid any calamity. Now you have acted against these rules, you departed from loyalty. For an official to serve the king without loyalty is like a son who is not filial towards his father. Treasures obtained from disloyalty, I do not want! A son who is not filial, I do not want! Son, go away!

...夫為人臣而事其君，猶為人子而事其父也。盡力竭能，忠信不欺，務在效忠，必死奉命，廉潔公正，故遂而無患。今子反是，遠忠矣。夫為人臣不忠，是為人子不孝也。不義之財，非吾有也。不孝之子，非吾子也。子起。(LNZ 1,14,1)

Also in this case order is restored after the son asks for forgiveness. The moral lesson is a general ethical prescription. In the moral vision of Liu Xiang, the link between the sage mother and her son is that of guidance on one side, and obedience on the other. Women, as mothers, have the possibility of acting as “active agents”, playing a fundamental role in spreading messages of wisdom, stepping out of an ideal “threshold” that draws the lines of an ethically based society.

(2) The Adoptive Mother: “My Kin” vs. “Your Kin”

As stated before, in the Chinese classical ethical system the female subject is defined inside a familial/kinship relation. Nevertheless, in *LNZ*, in two cases, maternal virtue is also extended to adopted children. We are dealing here with “The benevolent mother of Mang of Wei” (No. 13 *Wei Mang ci mu* 魏芒慈母) and “The tutor matron of the woman of Qi” (No. 8 *Qi nü fumu* 齊女傅母).

The benevolent mother of Mang of Wei carefully watched not only over her own three sons but also over her husband’s deceased first wife’s three sons. These are the words that Liu Xiang puts in her mouth:

As a second mother, I am like a mother; being a mother and not being able to love others’ children, would this be kindness? To care only for your own children and be biased against others, how could I take my place in this world? Even if our love is not mutual, how could I ever forget righteousness?

繼母如母，為人母而不能愛其子，可謂慈乎！親其親而偏其假，可謂義乎！不慈且無義，何以立於世！彼雖不愛，妾安可以忘義乎！（*LNZ* 1,13,2）

We can see here a direct link to the fact that, given that a woman's personal success in her career and moral rectitude mirrors her own virtue as an exemplary mother, it is not natural birth that gives her the possibility to express her virtue, but the social action of educating children. In the future development of morality and women, fertility becomes more important, and infertility is increasingly considered unacceptable. In the *LNZ*, however, in the mother-son relation, the educational aspect is more important than the biological one.

(3) The Relation with In-Laws and the Role of Peacekeeping within the Family and Outside

These mothers are dedicated both to their sons and daughters, and to their in-laws. Ding Jiang, a Lady of Wei (No. 7 *Wei gu Ding Jiang* 衛姑定姜) is one of them. When Ding Jiang's son died without children, after making sure that the daughter-in-law had completed the three-year ritual mourning period, Ding Jiang sent her back to her home. The story tells the sorrow of the departure of the two ladies, and the final sentence is as follows:

The nobleman says: Ding Jiang was a loving mother-in-law; she went beyond (her duty) and attained great kindness.

君子謂定姜為慈姑過而之厚。（*LNZ* 1,7,1）

This story is particularly important if we consider that in the Ming-Qing period not only was a widow's marriage banned, but a widow's chastity and her physical sacrifice, sometimes even leading to death, were highly praised and considered a honour for the whole community.⁷

Bearing womanly virtue, they bring harmony and peace in the house. Of Yousheng Consort of Tang (No. 5 *Tang fei Youshen* 湯妃有嬖) it is written:

⁷ The first appearance of the celebration of widows' chastity is in the *Hou Tang shu* 後唐書. In the *LNZ* of the Ming dynasty there are 233 examples of women committing suicide after their husband's death. According to Lee Yao (1983, 80) the total number of widows committing suicide during the Ming dynasty was 8,688, and 27,141 women were said to have mutilated themselves after their husband's deaths. See also in Sun 1988.

When Youshen became the wife of Tang, she gathered together and led the wives of all ranks, in women's chambers there was order, none of them was jealous towards another; this is how she helped the king's success. The nobleman says that the consort was enlightened and brought about order.

有嬖之妃湯也，統領九嬪，後宮有序，咸無妒媚逆理之人，卒致王功。君子謂妃明而有序。(LNZ 1,5,2)

(4) Daily Life: Warp and Loom as a Symbol of Morality in the Narrative of Women

Everyday life for women was divided between devotion to their houses' males and their only allowed activities: weaving and cooking. Powerful statements on the division of labour between men and women are already to be found in the *Shijing* 詩經, but it is only with Liu Xiang that the loom embodies the woman's world of significance in a gendered society.

The division of labour was normative: men took care of ploughing, women worked on the loom. As Hinsch (2003, 599) states: "Women's matters (*Nüshi* 女事) or women's work (*Nügong* 女工) referred only to cloth making while normative men's work consisted of growing grain". This form of economic organization yielded a successful society, and from very early on the loom assumed a metaphorical meaning.

The teaching from the *Daya* section of the *Shijing* quoted in the story of Jing Jiang says:

The *Shijing* says: "A wife is not involved in public affairs, she confines herself to her spinning and weaving."⁸

《詩》曰：“婦無公事，休其蠶織”。

8 The original poem in the *Shijing* is:

鞠人伎忒、譖始竟背。豈曰不極、伊胡為慝。如賈三倍、君子是識。婦無公事、休其蠶織。

Legge (1871, 561–62) translates this as follows: "They beat men down, hurtful, deceitful. Their slanders in the beginning may be falsified in the end, But they do not say [that their words were] very wrong; [They say], What evil was there in them? As if in the three times cent per cent of traffic, a superior man should have any knowledge of it; so a woman who has nothing to do with public affairs, Leaves her silk-worms and weaving." This translation is not at all clear, as stated also by as Allen (1891, 445–46): "The last four lines of this stanza are most incomprehensible." He suggests: "Does not the wise man know that a woman has nothing to do with public affairs? Shall she leave her silk-worms and weaving?" It has been transmitted in Chinese tradition as a statement on *nan nü zhi bie* 男女之別 (man-woman separation) in terms of labor division.

Liu Xiang goes on:

It means that a woman's occupation is spinning and weaving. If she does not pursue this occupation, she is not practicing *li*.

言婦人以織績為公事者也。休之非禮也。(LNZ 1,9,8)

The equivalence between loom-work for women and *li* 禮 “ritual” is a strong definition of feminine “moral personhood”.

Both Mencius's mother and Jing Jiang use the loom as a metaphor of their moral teaching:

When Wenbo served as Minister in Lu, Jing Jiang told him, “I will tell you how the essentials of ruling a country can be found in [the art of weaving]: everything depends upon the warp! The ‘temple’ is the means by which the crooked is made straight. It must be strong. The temple can therefore be thought of as the general. The reed is the means by which one makes uniform what is irregular and brings into line the unruly. Therefore the reed can be thought of as the director. The ‘hairpin’ is the means by which one organizes the coarse and dense fibres [that have become entangled]. The hairpin can therefore be thought of as the capital grandee. That which can maintain connection without losing control of [the threads] moving inward and those moving outward is the batten. The batten can be thought of as the great envoy. That which pushes and goes out and which pulls and comes back is the heddles. The heddles can be thought of as the commander of the populace within the passes. That which manages [the threads] in numbers great and small is the warp-spacing reed. The warp-spacing reed can be thought of as the clerk of the capital. That which fulfils a key role, travels a long way, is exact, upright, and firm is the cloth-beam. The cloth-beam can be thought of as the prime minister. That which unrolls without limit is the warp-beam. The warp-beam can be thought of as the Three Excellencies.” Wenbo bowed twice and received her teaching.⁹

文伯相魯。敬姜謂之曰：「吾語汝，治國之要，盡在經矣。夫幅者，所以正曲枉也，不可不彊，故幅可以為將。畫者，所以均不均、服不服也，故畫可以為正。物者，所以治蕪與莫也，故物可以為都大夫。持交而不失，出入不絕者，捫也。捫可以為大行人

9 Translation in Kinney 2014, 13. Given the technicality and complexity of this passage, I retain here Kinney's translation.

也。推而往，引而來者，綜也。綜可以為關內之師。主多少之數者，均也。均可以為內史。服重任，行遠道，正直而固者，軸也。軸可以為相。舒而無窮者，摘也。摘可以為三公。」文伯再拜受教。(LNZ 1,9,5)

And there's more. The Mother of Meng Ke of Zou (No.11 *Zou Mengke mu* 鄒孟軻母) uses the popular story of cutting the thread of her loom to show her son the importance of continuity and endurance in the activity one is devoted to.

When Mencius was still young, still pursuing his studies, he came back home. His mother was weaving the loom. She asked: "How is your instruction?" He answered: "As it was before." So, Mrs. Meng cut the thread with a knife. The son was startled and asked her the reason of this act. She said: "The interruption of your studies is like me cutting my own loom work. The nobleman acquires his status through studying, asks questions to broaden his knowledge. This is why we came to live in this quiet place, to stay away from bad influences. But now, this happens, so you won't be able to stay away from humble positions, and it will not be easy to keep calamities away. It is like a woman who is weaving or cooking, but halfway abandons her job. How can a woman weave garments for her husband and sons, or be sure they have enough food? If women abandon their position and men abandon their moral education, if they don't become thieves, they might become slaves!

孟子之少也，既學而歸，孟母方績，問曰：“學何所至矣？”孟子曰：“自若也。”孟母以刀斷其織。孟子懼而問其故，孟母曰：“子之廢學，若吾斷斯織也。夫君子學以立名，問則廣知，是以居則安寧，動則遠害。今而廢之，是不免於廝役，而無以離於禍患也。何以異於織績而食，中道廢而不為，寧能衣其夫子，而長不乏糧食哉！女則廢其所食，男則墮於脩德，不為竊盜，則為虜役矣。”(LNZ 1,11,3)

The loom is, therefore, not only the main occupation in the ideal woman's daily life, but also a means of communication, in which an alphabet of significance is housed.

(5) Daily Life: Pregnancy and Foetal Education

The gender role of woman as educator is prior to the birth event. The book talks about "foetal instruction", *tai jiao* 胎教. This means that a wise woman knows

how to instruct her son when he is still in her womb, and only this knowledge will ensure a virtuous progeny.

The story of Tai Si in “The three mothers of the house of Zhou”, gives women directions for pregnancy:

In ancient times, a pregnant woman with child would not lie on her side as she slept; neither would she sit sideways or stand on one foot. She would not eat food with odd flavours; if the food was cut awry, she would not eat it; if the mat was not placed straight, she would not sit on it. She did not let her eyes gaze on odd sights or let her ears listen to depraved sounds. At night she ordered blind musicians to chant the Odes. She spoke only of proper things. In this way she gave birth to children of correct physical form who excelled others in talent and virtue. Thus, during pregnancy, one must always be cautious about [external] feelings. If one is stimulated by good feelings, then [the child] will be good. If one is stimulated by evil feelings, then [the child] will be evil.

古者婦人妊子，寢不側，坐不邊，立不蹕，不食邪味，割不正不食，席不正不坐，目不視於邪色，耳不聽於淫聲。夜則令瞽誦詩，道正事。如此，則生子形容端正，才德必過人矣。故妊子之時，必慎所感。感於善則善，感於惡則惡。(LNZ 1,6,4)

Besides practical advice on pregnancy, the book also contains two accounts of supernatural pregnancies. Two exemplary women gave birth to two mythical sons:¹⁰ Jiang Yuan gave birth to Hou Ji¹¹ (No. 2 *Qi mu Jiang Yuan* 棄母姜嫄), and Jian Di became the mother of Xie (No. 3 *Xie mu Jian Di* 契母簡狄). The first one became pregnant after she stepped on a giant’s footprint. When she became aware of her pregnancy, because her belly was swollen, she tried to get rid of the baby:

The mother of Ji, Jiang Yuan, was the daughter of the Marquis of Tai. In Yao’s time, while walking, she came upon a giant’s footprint; being curious, she placed her foot in it, and when she returned she found out she was pregnant. She began to grow larger and often felt nausea, so she called in priests who could help her get rid of the baby through divination and sacrifice. In the end the baby was born. Thinking that it was of evil omen, she abandoned the baby boy on a narrow path, but cows and goats did not trample on it. Then she brought it to a forest, but woodcutters

10 This case is mentioned here, not for its moral value, but to highlight the incursion from a legendary world into the pragmatic historical world, a feature that will survive in subsequent literary tradition.

11 Hou Ji is the god of agriculture and the founder of Zhou people (see Birrel 1993, 54–56).

picked him up and sheltered him in a straw bedding. So she took him back, and put him on ice, but birds shielded him with their wings.

棄母姜嫄者，邠侯之女也。當堯之時，行見巨人跡，好而履之，歸而有娠，浸以益大，心怪惡之，卜筮禳祀，以求無子，終生子。以為不祥而棄之隘巷，牛羊避而不踐。乃送之平林之中，後伐平林者咸薦之覆之。乃取置寒冰之上，飛鳥偪翼之。(LNZ 1,2,1)

The birth of Ji is not only a magical one, as it also tells the story of an unwelcome baby and the numerous efforts the “virtuous” mother makes in order to get rid of him.

Jian Di, mother of Xie, became pregnant by accidentally swallowing an egg while she was taking a bath:¹²

In Yao’s times, she went with her sisters to bathe in the waters of the Xuanqiu. A black bird flew overhead and released an egg that she was holding with her claws. It was multi-coloured and very beautiful. Jian Di and her sisters vied to gather it, Jian Di picked it up and put it in her mouth. By mistake, she swallowed it, subsequently giving birth to Xie.

當堯之時，與其妹娣浴於玄丘之水。有玄鳥銜卵，過而墜之。五色甚好，簡狄與其妹娣競往取之。簡狄得而含之，誤而吞之，遂生契焉。(LNZ 1,3,1)

The rational pruning of traditional tales that characterized the historical approach of Sima Qian in the past, and of Liu Xiang in this historiographic phase, does not keep the author from accepting supernatural events and reporting them as historical facts. The urgency of the moral message is stronger than that of rational evidence.

(6) Daily Life: Death and Mourning

We already mentioned Ding Jiang 定姜. When her son died, just after marriage, without children, she allowed her beloved daughter-in-law to go back to her family. But, before that, she wanted to be sure that she had observed the three-year mourning period. In the same chapter she was very concerned after her husband’s death because Kan, the son of one of her husband’s concubines, took his father’s throne, but did not excel in mourning etiquette.

¹² Mentioned by Birrel 1993, 256.

After she had finished weeping, Ding Jiang, upon seeing that Kan wasn't sorrowful and did not make the ritual offerings of food and drink, sighed and said: "This man will be the ruin of the state, and before that even of virtuous people. And Heaven will smite the country with great calamities! ..."

定姜既哭而息，見獻公之不哀也，不內食飲，嘆曰：「是將敗衛國，必先害善人，天禍衛國也！...」(LNZ 1,7,3)

This story is recorded to praise Ding Jiang, but the moral aim of leading the king to practice proper mourning rituals is clear: the construction of the "moral personhood" in this book is aimed at women and men alike. Women's social/ritual construction is instrumental to the education of men. This recalls the tradition of the *Zuozhuan*.

The already mentioned Jing Jiang, wife of the Count of Mu, mother of the Count of Wen, is another bearer of a message of mourning etiquette. Jing Jiang is the woman of whom Confucius says: "She knows the difference between men and women" (仲尼謂敬姜別於男女之禮矣). The chapter on her is mainly related to her mourning her husband first, and only afterwards her son.

The Count of Mu first died, Jing Jiang observed the ritual.

穆伯先死，敬姜守養。(ibid.)

When the Count of Wen died, Jing Jiang admonished his concubines: "I heard that for a man who loves the inside (*nei* 內), women are willing to die, and for a man who loves the outside (*wai* 外), his officials are willing to die. Today my son died prematurely, I don't want to hear that he favoured the inner quarters, that would humiliate his women. So I invite you, in the mourning you should not become emaciated, not ruin yourself in shed tears, not beat your breasts, not release your sorrow, but wear reduced mourning clothing, not increased, follow the *li*, and be tranquil; this is the right way to remember my son.

文伯卒，敬姜戒其妾曰：「吾聞之，『好內，女死之；好外，士死之。』今吾子夭死，吾惡其以好內聞也，二三婦之辱。共祀先祀者，請毋瘠色，毋揮涕，毋陷膺，毋憂容，有降服，毋加服，從禮而靜，是昭吾子。(LNZ 1,7,11)

When Jing Jiang was in mourning, in the morning she wept for the Count of Mu, her husband, in the evening she wept for the count of Wen, her son.

敬姜之處喪也，朝哭穆伯，暮哭文伯。(LNZ 1,7,12)

The actions related to the mourning of one's male family members are highly ritualized: the expressions of sorrow for the death of the beloved are replaced by social signs, like clothing and a tranquil attitude.

Conclusions and Further Implications

In this paper we analysed the main patterns of ethical "womanhood" within the narrative tradition included in the first book of Liu Xiang's *LNZ*.

By way of conclusion, and answering the introductory questions, we can state that the tradition of defining ethical rules through examples of virtuous women is confirmed by Liu Xiang. He, in the process of adopting a more rigid pattern of defining the social being, inherits the historical tradition of the *wen* from the *Shijing* (that he places within his own text) to the philosophical texts of the *Chun-qiu* schools; from historical texts, such as *Zuozhuan* and the *Shiji*, he derives the moral aim of the narration through *exempla*; but, keeping in mind the priority of the moral aim, in pruning the contents of tradition he deliberately fails to mark a distinct line between "real" facts and "legendary" narratives. Moreover, he acquires new concepts from Dong Zhongshu, mixing *Tian* 天 and *Ren* 仁 in *Li* 禮.

Nevertheless, the pre-Han textual tradition showed more differentiation in the *exempla* of women. The *LNZ*, in building a theoretical/ethical framework on moral personhood, highlights a proactive role of women in the family and society.

Among the categories originally introduced, the physical separation between men and women may be considered the most important one. In the *LNZ* it is very well articulated, and marks the different fields of action of the two subjects in the new gendered society. In fact, Liu Xiang allows some women to stay on the threshold: the boundaries seem to be still flexible and not rigidly prescriptive.

The women that he values as models for the construction of the social ethical system he is building are not entirely subjugated, but have specific areas of action, given by their being part of a relational net within the family, attentive disciples of *li*, and, most of all, educable and educated. We can see them as women on the threshold, materially and virtually standing on a border line, between the *nei* and the *wai*.

This notwithstanding, the apparently contradictory framework depicted by him leaves room for future speculations towards a more reclusive and subjugated position of women within the more and more oppressive family rules that crystallize after Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), and even more in Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) 12th century.

In line with general studies on Chinese traditional ethics (Ule, 2019; Vervoorn, 2004, among others), our analysis confirms that even though the narration on womanhood in Chinese ethics includes some *exempla* about extraordinary women professing their subjectivity outside the family and clan borders, the main trend, from the *LNZ* on, was that of shaping an increasingly subjugated model of social agent. Liu Xiang's discourse appears to crystallize this trend on women's ethics. In his work, a semantic shift occurs in the category of *fu dao*, or *fu li*, originally addressing the marriage status or the marriage performance. It seems to coincide with the knowledge and wisdom these women show. A wisdom that allows them to speak aloud, even though only from their quarters, the inner chambers, thus positioning them on the threshold. But, the questions are: where does this wisdom come from, and how does one acquire it? The answers are not specified.

One woman tried to answer this question, Ban Zhao (49–120 CE). She was the first author (a woman *litterata*) who made a philological study of *LNZ*; in her introduction to the didactic text *Nüjie* 女诫, she wrote:

But what now anguishes me is that my daughters can be proper persons, that they won't make mistakes due to the fact that they have not received a gradual education, and they have never heard about the rites of women! ...

但伤诸女方当适人，而不渐训诲，不闻妇礼，惧失容它门，取耻宗族。吾今疾在沈滞，性命无常，念汝曹如此，每用惆怅。间作《女诫》七章，愿诸女各写一通，庶有补益，裨助汝身。去矣，其勩勉之！

In the first chapter, Ban Zhao takes the metaphor of the loom, not only to say that weaving is the main productive activity of a virtuous woman, but also to express the way an infant girl learns her position in the family:

In ancient times, three days after her birth,
the girl slept under the bed and played with the loom weighs.¹³

古者生女三日，卧之床下，弄之瓦砖

Her work was namely that of trying to empower women through knowledge, the knowledge of *fu li* and *fu dao* that had been praised several times in the *LNZ*; furthermore, it helped define women's social role and give them an increasingly definite position.

13 This comes from the *Shijing* (*Xiaoya*): "When a daughter is born, she will be made to sleep on the floor, she will be swaddled, she will get a loom-spool to play with."

Ban Zhao herself was a “woman on the threshold”, giving the right instructions to other women so that they could fit properly in a system that was leading towards ever more tragic experiences. As we know, especially in the Ming-Qing Period, the boundaries around women’s bodies became tighter and tighter; further philosophical interpretation of the *wen* became more and more detrimental to defining women’s social position, impacting greatly on their everyday lives.¹⁴ At the end of the Ming dynasty the saying *Nüzi wu cai bian shi de* 女子無才便是德, “A woman with no talent is a virtuous one”, was so widespread that the entire education discourse seemed to lose all value.¹⁵

The impact of Liu Xiang’s work was thus a keypoint in the construction of morals with regard to women, an important building block in Chinese ethical discourse.

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14 We will just mention here the invalidating custom of foot binding, on which much research has been carried out, both from a historical and an anthropological perspective. See Dorothy Ko (2001; 2005) among others.

15 Nevertheless, this saying, very popular also in our days, was spreading in a time when many talented women had begun to appear on the public scene, especially at the end of the Qing period.

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