

The Life of Women in the Six Dynasties**

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I. Introduction

Traditional Chinese society has been customarily characterized as Confucian, and women have been perceived as restrained and inferior. In agreement with such characterization and perception, general works on the history of Chinese women and marriage sometimes cited marriage in the ancient Classics and scholarly-promulgated regulations as evidence of Confucian norms in practice. Opponents of such depiction would use the life of women in the Six Dynasties (A.D. 220-518) to dispute, and sometimes attributed the larger role of women in this period to the decline of Confucian ethics. Both heroically suicidal widows and furiously jealous women have been recorded in the standard histories and attracted historians' attention to the nature of female ethics (Ch'en, 1926, pp. 73-77; Liu, 1991, pp. 27-34; Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV"). However, most women probably did not experience such dramatic events in their lives.

This article intends to portray the average life of women in the Six Dynasties, applying not only the standard histories, but also archaeological materials, epitaphs, and contemporary literature. It shows the agreement and discrepancy between classical teaching and social practice with regard to women's life, and argues that women in this period did not necessarily go against Confucian female ethics, nor escape from the assigned wifely obligations, even though they played a larger role in society than the ancient Classics had defined. It will first examine the precepts of female propriety prescribed in the Classics and promulgated by contemporary scholars, then depict a more realistic picture of a woman's social, educational, economic and family life. At the end of the article, there will be a gen-

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eral presentation of women's life in this period, based on information from the epitaphs of nearly two hundred and seventy women.

Two reservations, however, have to be made in advance. First, due to the nature and the availability of materials, this article, except the section on women's economic activities, reveals mostly the life stories of average aristocratic women. Second, conflicts and negative emotions, such as jealousy, did exist in women's marital life, owing to either concubinage or the two wives anomaly in this period. They are examined in a separate study by this author (Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV"). This article thus presents more of a general picture than dramatic events of women's life.

II. Norms and Reality of a Woman's Life

1. Confucian Axioms

According to the ancient Classics, a woman should follow three men in different stages of her life. She should follow her father before she was married; her husband, after she married him; and her son, if she was widowed. These three men were to give her protection, honor and support throughout her life, and she was to follow their guidance and direction as well as official fate (Li Chi, "Chiao-t'e-sheng", 26/19b). Gender segregation was the norm, and she should avoid contact even with male relatives (Li Chi, "Nei-tse", 27/8ab; "Chü-li", 2/13ab). Men were expected to get married at thirty years of age, and women at twenty (Li Chi, "Nei-tse", 29/21b). In her married life, a woman was to exhibit wifely virtues such as submissiveness, loyalty, and endurance, especially because concubinage was considered the norm, and she would have to bear the existence of another woman in the household. She was to occupy a status slightly inferior to that of her husband. Her main obligation was to serve his family, particularly his parents, by producing sons and preparing food and clothing for them. (Li Chi, "Nei-tse", 27/3a-9b)

Historians have suggested that most of these norms were established by the end of the Chou dynasty (ca.1100-221 B.C.). Later development was to see the ancient rites, presumably practiced among the nobility, diffusing down to the lower levels of society through various ethical teaching and legal regulations promulgated by the governments after the Han (206B.C.- A.D.220). (Liu, 1982, pp. 421-472)

Scholarly works had elaborated the classical norms regarding the woman's role in family and society since the mid-Eastern Han (25-220). Various essays, with titles such as "Lessons for Women" were written since Pan Chao (ca. 45-120) had produced hers. Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh* [Lessons for Women], however, served as a blueprint for others to follow. The four "womanly qualifications" were explained in detail: to guard carefully her chastity was "womanly virtue" (fu-te); to choose her words with care was the characteristics of "womanly words" (fu-yen); to wash and scrub filth away was called "womanly appearance" (fu-jung), and to sew and to weave with wholehearted devotion was the nature of "womanly work" (fu-kung). Pan Chao claimed that these four qualifications characterized the greatest virtues of a woman. (Pan Chao, *Nü Chieh*)

Since then, at least thirty different works aiming at women's education and behavior were written by the end of the Six Dynasties.¹ They gave instructions and model examples of virtuous womanly life. One of their common features was to teach a woman chastity, diligence and submissiveness both to her husband and his parents while at the same time dismissing the use of fine dresses and cosmetics. "Womanly appearance" was often defined as a clean face, appropriate dress and modest expressions. In many cases it was downplayed by the authors to make the other three womanly characteristics more visible. (Ch'eng Hsiao, "Nü-tien-p'ien"; Hsün Shuang, "Nü-chieh"; Chang Hua, "Nü-shih-chen"; Wang I, "Fu-te-chen"; Yamasaki, 1984, pp.19- 24.)

The segregation of men and women was proposed again by scholars like Hsün Shuang and Ko Hung (Hsün Shuang, "Nü-chieh"; Ko Hung, *Pao P'u Tzu*, hereafter cited as PPT, p. 149). Segregation applied not only to physical encounters, but also in social functions. A woman's role was to be confined to caring for household matters. She should preside over the household supplies of wine, food and clothing. Even intelligent women with extra energy should not participate in politics, nor meddle in other people's affairs in the family. According to Yen Chih-t'ui (531- 591), wise women should help their husbands by supplementing the latter's deficiencies, because "no hen should herald the dawn lest misfortune follow." (Yen Chih-t'ui, Yen Shih Chia Hsün, hereafter cited as YSCH, p. 59)

Although there is no evidence of anyone, man or woman, who argued for a larger role for women, the confined role was not seriously played by women in the Six Dynasties. Both historians' description and scholars' detestations of contemporary customs show that people in this period were not restricted by such rules.

1. A chart that contains bibliographical notes for thirty one such works is included in Yamasaki Juitsu, Dec. 1984, pp. 18-45.

2. Social Activities

Ko Hung, writing at the beginning of the fourth century, detested the idea that a man, in the name of "intimacy," would go to the inner chamber to see his wife or that men and women would sit around and toast one another (PPT, pp. 148-149). His criticism of the "erroneous" behavior of his contemporaries well described the social life an aristocratic woman could have led.

Through his accounts, one knows that to stay home weaving and preparing food for the family was not the only thing women did in his days. Instead, they engaged in various kinds of social activities. They attended social occasions such as celebrations and funerals and made friends there. Buddhist temples seem to have been one of the popular gathering places since Ko Hung said that women enjoyed playing there. They also visited relatives and friends, watched fishing and farming, went hiking and played around on the beaches. They must have been aristocratic women since they took retainers and maids with them when they went out. But the maids apparently got a taste of such glamorous social life. Family rules did not seem to have been strict on these women since Ko Hung said that they either stayed overnight at other people's houses or went home very late at night. Also, there must have been many of them since Ko Hung described them as filling the streets as if the streets were markets, drinking and singing along the road, licentiously teasing one another and considering themselves refined. (PPT, p. 148)

Women would not be able to behave this way if the other gender in the society had not also accepted such customs. When Hsia-hou Chin was the governor of Ch'en-liu, he recommended Wei Chen as an accounts clerk (*chi-li*), and asked Wei Chen to bring his wife with him to a banquet. Chen refused by saying that such was a custom in a declining society (Ch'en Shou, *San Kuo Chih*, hereafter cited as SKC, p. 647). Wei Chen's attitude may have accorded with that of scholars like Ko Hung, but the fact that Hsia-hou Chin invited both of the couple suggests customary practice at that time.²

As a southerner living around the fall of the Western Chin dynasty (263-317), Ko Hung described the life-style of either an aristocratic woman in the capital Lo-yang area or a southern woman influenced by the émigré aristocracy from the North, but he could also

2. Examples of men and women attending banquets and playing together can also be found in *Chin Shu*, p. 2411.

have been referring to the situation in much of China.³ In the kingdom of Shu (221-263), which occupied the southwest of China, women are said to have visited sacrificial sites in luxurious carriages and attended banquets that sometimes lasted for several days. (Yang Ch'üan, "Ch'ing-tz'u")

The situation may have changed by the sixth century, although the nature of changes is hard to decide. In his family instructions, Yen Chih-t'ui compared the social vitality between northern (yeh-hsia) and southern (chiang-tung) women.⁴ He noticed that the southern women usually had little social contact. Sometimes even in-laws did not visit each other for more than ten years, and they only sent regards to each other by messengers or letters (YSCH, p. 60). Under such circumstances, it is hard to imagine married women visiting relatives, not to mention other recreational activities as described by Ko Hung.

However, religious activities may still have been popular among women both in the North and in the South. Northern aristocratic women visited Buddhist temples, attended miracle sites, supported Buddhist societies (Yang Hsüan-chih, *Lo-yang ch'ieh-lan-chi*, "P'ing-teng temple", 2/11-12; "Yao-kuang temple", 1/12b-14a; "K'ai-shan temple", 4/9b-12b.), participated in donation, image-building (Yü-wen Ta, "tsao-shih-chia-hsiang-chi"), and relic-worshipping (Wang Shao, "She-li kan-yin chi pieh-lu"). In the South, when Emperor Liang-wu (502-549) held general Buddhist meetings in A.D. 535, it is said that over three hundred and fifty thousand people participated everyday, including monks, nuns, and lay believers, both men and women (Hsiao Tzu-hsien, "Yü-chiang-muo-ko-puo-juo-ching-hsü").

Some aspects of women's social life may have been cut back in the South, such as visiting relatives. What Yen Chih-t'ui had observed may have revealed the different ideas and structures of families between the North and the South. This is a subject that requires separate study.⁵ So far as women's social life is concerned, southern women were still seen

3. Along with the changing power of different regimes during this three hundred years period, the boundary between the North and the South changed too. For the sake of convenience, this article will use "the North" to designate the area north of the Yangtze river bend, and "the South", the area south of it, even though sometimes the Southern dynasties also occupied areas north of Yangtze and south of the Huai river.

4. When Yen Chih-t'ui wrote in the Northern Ch'i (550-570) and Southern Ch'en (557-589) period, Chiang-tung should have been southeast of the Yangtze river. However, throughout the Six Dynasties, the Southern Dynasties usually also occupied the area between the Huai river and the Yangtze river.

5. For instance, see Tu Cheng-sheng, 1992.

in various religious gatherings and northern women appeared to have had even larger space. In the early Sui dynasty (581-618), a memorial was sent to the throne, proposing prohibition of wrestling games in the Lantern Festival because during these gatherings in the capital Lo-yang and its vicinity, "(people) mistook debauchery as jubilation and considered wantonness as gaiety," "beautiful dresses and cosmetics, horses and carriages filled (the places)," therefore, "the noble and the humble were not distinguished and men and women mingled together." (Sui Shu, pp. 1483-1484) Although the proposal was granted by the emperor, the custom described in the memorial suggests plenty of free space for women in social activities by the end of the Six Dynasties.

3. Scholarly Learning

Women studied some books on female virtues and behavior in their young age. Epitaphs of aristocratic women in this period suggest that many of them were familiar with Pan Chao's *Nü chieh* and similar works (Chao Wan-li, Han Wei Nan-pei-ch'ao Mu Chih Chi Shih, hereafter cited as M CCS, 3/15a, 4/29ab, 4/35b-36a, 8/912b-913a, 9/103a, 9/104a, 10/109b). But this may have been one of the many aspects of their education instead of the only lessons they had. Aristocratic families educated their offspring, both boys and girls, with family manners (*chia-feng*) and family learning (*chia-hsüeh*) (Ch'ien Mu, 1963). Besides tracts on the proper roles for women, young girls studied calligraphy (M CCS, 4/35b-36a. Wang Hsien-chih, "Pao-mu chuan-chih"), literature, history (M CCS, 4/27a, 4/35b-36a, 7/72a, 9/103a, 10/110a), some Confucian Classics (M CCS, 3/19b, 4/27a, 4/29ab, 9/103a) and religious texts.

History suggests that young girls who were interested in religious vocation had the opportunity to read such texts. Nun An-ling-shou of the Latter Chao (319-350) is said to have enjoyed Buddhist learning since childhood (Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan, hereafter cited as PCNC, 1/4a-5a). Nun Fa-hsüan of the Southern Liang (502-557) was born and raised in a Buddhist family; she began to chant the Buddhist sutra at the age of eighteen (PCNC, 4/12b-13a). However, not all women who read religious texts joined monastic orders. Some simply carried on their earthly life while enjoying the learning (see discussion in Section III below). Moreover, although women may have shared some basic educational programs, the learning to which women were exposed differed somewhat in the North and the South.

In the South, most women who are said to be intelligent showed their knowledge of

calligraphy, accounting, history and some classical literature.⁶ Han Lan-yin was selected into the Liu-Sung (420-479) imperial palace because of her good education. In the Southern Ch'i (479-502), she was appointed as an Erudite; what she taught was calligraphy. (Nan Shih, hereafter cited as NS, p. 330)

Northern women's learning was attested in classical studies, political affairs and military skill. Ms. Sung was raised by her father since her mother died early. After she grew up, her father taught her the pronunciation and meaning of Chou Li. He said that since he had no son to carry on the family learning, he expected her to learn it so it would not become extinct. When Fu Chien became the King of the Former Ch'in state (357-384), Erudite Lu K'un suggested that Ms. Sung should take disciples and teach Chou Li since much of the classical learning and commentary tradition had been lost in the political chaos of the time. The suggestion was taken and a lecture hall was established in Sung's house. She then started teaching one hundred and twenty disciples behind a red silk curtain. (Chin Shu, p. 2522)

Three facts that concern contemporary female status attract a reader's attention. First, Ms. Sung's father was widowed without male offspring but did not marry again. Second, transferring family learning through a daughter was acceptable to an aristocratic scholar. Third, the northern government and scholarly society recognized a woman's capability in transmitting the Classics.

Ms. Feng, the daughter of senior recorder (san-chi-ch'ang-shih) Feng K'ai, was intelligent and knowledgeable. Wei Shu says that sometimes high officials would visit her to ask for her advice and to seek her knowledge if they came upon contemporary stories and precedents with which they were not familiar (WS, p. 1978). Yüan Yu's wife Hsüeh Po-hui was so well educated that when Yu discussed legal and administrative matters with her, she could always provide him with good advice and guidelines (MCCS, 4/29ab). Cheng Shan-kuo's mother Ms. Ts'ui of Ch'ing-ho is also said to have been a very knowledgeable woman about political affairs; she would sit behind a screen to supervise her son's official performance. (Pei Shih, p. 3007)

Empress Dowager Lin of the Northern Wei often practiced archery personally in the palace backyard. Official Ts'ui Kuang remonstrated regarding such behavior and suggested

6. For instance, Empress Hsi, Liang Shu, P. 157; Empress Chang, Ch'en Shu, p. 126; Empress Shen, Ch'en Shu, p. 130.

that archery and horse-riding belonged to men, while women should practice propriety, music, calligraphy and accounting (WS, p. 1492). Apparently, what Ts'ui Kuang, a Confucian aristocrat, considered to be appropriate for women were the skills cultivated by southern women. But women in the North seem to have had some additional space in their educational activities.

4. Economic Activities

Cooking and needle work appear to have been the major occupations for women; it suggests that the wife's foremost obligation in this period was still to prepare food and clothing for the family. A commoner's wife had to prepare the meals herself; an aristocratic woman also knew the methods of gourmet cooking even though she might have some maids to help her. Hsiao Tao-chéng's wife is said to have joined her mother and sisters in preparing family meals whenever she visited her natal family. That was when Tao-chéng was an official of the Liu-Sung, before he became the founding emperor of the Southern Ch'i dynasty. (NS, p. 329)

Brick paintings excavated from the Ho-hsi region (today's Chiu-ch'üan district of Kansu province in northwest China) provide pictures of all kinds of labor work performed in an aristocratic family (see Figure I; Wen Wu, 1974:9, pp. 66-70). To depict various scenes in a kitchen, there were pictures of cooking instruments, meat racks, animals being slaughtered, dishes being washed, water being drawn from a well, and food being cooked. Most of the laborers shown were women except those responsible for slaughtering pigs and sheep (Hsin-chung-kuo ti k'ao-ku fa-hsien yü yen-chiu, 1984, p. 524). But many aristocratic women were knowledgeable of such processes and some did it themselves. Epitaphs of the northern women show that cooking was one of the lessons for young girls and preparing meals as well as sacrificial food was considered praiseworthy (MCCS, 2/8b, 3/15a, 3/21a, 4/26a, 4/27ab, 6/59b-60a, 7/71b-72a, 9/104a). Ts'ui Hao, high aristocratic official of the Northern Wei, once noted that he remembered from childhood seeing his mother and aunts preparing food and wine to serve their in-laws and to offer sacrifices. They attended such labor personally without commanding the servants. (WS, p. 827)

Women also labored at needle work and related agricultural labor such as gathering mulberry leaves. Many women's epitaphs in this period specified needle work as women's main activities and contributions to the family (MCCS, 2/71, 3/15a, 4/26a, 4/28a, 4/35b,

4/35b-36a, 4/36ab, 6/57a, 6/58a, 6/59b-60a, 6/68a, 7/70b, 7/71b-72a, 7/77b, 8/86b-87a, 8/88a, 8/91b, 8/912b-913a, 9/100a, 9/104a). Brick paintings from the Wei-Chin tombs depict women gathering mulberry leaves while men cultivated the fields (see Figure I). However, collecting mulberry leaves may not have been the only agricultural labor which a woman would undertake. Since women were also entitled to twenty mou of land in the equal-field system of the Northern Wei, they may in some cases have labored in the fields too (WS, p. 2853). Hermit T'ao Ch'ien's wife was praised for being able to live a harsh life. When T'ao Ch'ien cultivated the field, she also plowed with him. (NS, p. 1859)

Driven by poverty, women might also have to sell the product of their needle work. Wang Seng-ju's mother is said to have supported the poor family by selling thin silk cloth in the market when Seng-ju was small (Liang Shu, p. 470). Commercial activities were not uncommon among poor women. A certain Mr. Ch'en's daughters collected and sold water caltrops to support the family (NS, p. 1817). Poor couples often worked together to make ends meet. For instance, Yüan Yung and his wife used to sell boots in the markets when they were poor. (WS, p. 2063)

Since women were involved in many different commercial activities, it seems reasonable to assume that they had certain property rights. However, with regard to women's free dom to possess and dispose of property, only sketchy information is available. There were hardly words in the Classics or in the law codes regarding a maiden's property rights. It would be assumed that she could not hold any private property if her parents were alive. However, in practice, an aristocratic young lady may have had some private possession. Ms. Lou is said to have refused marriage proposals from many powerful families. Instead, she sent her maid to express her feelings to Kao Huan and gave him her "private property" several times so that he could prepare the betrothal gifts and come to marry her. (Pei-Ch'i-Shu, p. 123)

Marriage created new variables for a woman's rights over property. According to the Classics, a wife was not supposed to have her own private property. In practice, however, a woman sometimes managed to keep private belongings, perhaps things from her dowry. But these things were rarely confirmed to be real estate; most often they were chattels such as

cash and jewels.⁷

Ms. Chou of the fifth century is said to have "provided her husband with all the capital" for his military uprising. The *Chin Shu* does not specify where that property came from. Since the couple lived with her in-laws, Ms. Chou could not have been using the couple's family wealth. The text does mention that Ms. Chou came from a rich family, and it seems possible that she was using resources that came from her dowry. (*Chin Shu*, p. 2518)⁸

Ms. Chao of the Northern Ch'i was widowed at a young age with only one daughter who later married a Regional Inspector. When Ms. Chao died, her epitaph shows, she left her wealth to the Buddhist treasury (*san-pao*) in her will (MCCS, 7/70b). There is no telling about the nature of the "wealth" mentioned here. It could be her dowry that she had long kept. It could also be property that her deceased husband had left for her widowhood since they had no son to inherit it.⁹ If the latter was the case, it raised other questions, such as her daughter's right to inherit the property and the right of her husband's family to claim inheritance. Unfortunately, there is no further information to answer specific questions in this case.

More clear than a wife's right to keep her private possession is her right to manage the family property. A senior wife of the household seems to be the one who handled the

7. According to the *Ch'in* code of the third century B.C., a wife who reported her husband's crime could keep her dowry from being confiscated. But the dowry mentioned in the text were clothes, appliances and servants from her natal family instead of any landed property (*Shui-hu-ti-ch'in-mu-chu-chien*, "fa-lü-ta-wen", p. 224). Trying to persuade Li Ch'ung, an Eastern Han scholar, to establish a separate household from his poor brothers, Ch'ung's wife assured Ch'ung that she had her own private property (*Hou Han Shu*, p. 2684). The text does not specify the nature of her property. Since Ch'ung's family was so poor that six brothers shared their food and clothes, it seems that Ch'ung's wife did not have to possess a lot for her to feel confident to propose the separation.

8. Dowry could be the most possible resource of a woman's private property. However, since betrothal gifts, instead of dowry was the main financial issue in marriage arrangements in the Six Dynasties, women in this period, unlike those in the Sung (960-1279), may not have brought an impressive amount of property with them when they got married. See Ebrey, 1991, pp. 97-132.

9. It is not sure whether woman in the Six Dynasties had to stay in widowhood to enjoy their husbands' property. Cases in the Sung dynasty suggest that some widows remarried with property left from their first marriages. It was not until the Yüan dynasty (1279-1368) did law codes prohibit widows from doing so. See Lau Nap-yin, 1991, pp. 37-76.

family property which may have been held under the name of either her husband or her son. Some women did it by helping their husbands with their businesses. Li Hung-chih's first wife made him rich by skillful management of his property. There is no further details of how she did it, but she was apparently allowed to handle the property for him. (WS, p. 1919)

A senior widow in a big household also handled the family resources. After Pao Lao-shou died, his wife Ms. Ch'eng re-established their family business and property. She is said to have regained their former prosperity and to have had about six or seven hundred servants (WS, p. 2023). The Ts'ui's lived together and did not divide the family for three generations. Ts'ui Hsiao-fen and his brothers respectfully served their Ms. widowed aunt Li who was in charge of the household. They handed whatever they earned to Ms. Li, and she decided the needs and distributed resources within the family. (WS, p. 1217)

A widow's disposition over property may have involved not only chattel transactions, but also real estate. A case in the Chin dynasty shows that a widow of a diviner was about to sell the house, which her husband had left her, during a hard time. Not until she found gold underneath the floor did she change her mind (Chin Shu, p. 2480).¹⁰ However, not all cases are as clear as this one with regard to the sources of a widow's property.

A story in the Southern Liang dynasty is also revealing yet inconclusive. Juan Hsiao-hsü was adopted as the heir of Juan Yin-chih, the paternal cousin of Hsiao-hsü's father,

¹⁰A Case in the Eastern Han also indicates the widow's right to alienate landed property, although it may have been done in the name of her orphaned son. Sun Ch'ang of the Eastern Han divided family land with his younger brother Lieh. After Lieh died, Ch'ang gave Lieh's widow and his orphan some grain during a famine and took away their share of the land. Lieh's son filed a suit when he grew up. The court's first decision was to blame Lieh's son because he took Ch'ang's grain earlier and then disputed the land later on. Only the Local Inspector of the North Sector (pei-pu-tu-yu) Chung-li I suggested that Ch'ang should return the land because it was not righteous for him to take advantage of his widowed sister-in-law and his nephew when they were desperate. (K'uai-chi tien-lu, cited from T'ai-P'ing-Yü-Lan, 639/7ab)

This story was perhaps recorded to show the ethical consideration in the legal verdict. It is hard to tell whether the widow gave away the land in the name of her son or by her own right. Given the fact that the son filed the lawsuit when he grew up, it is more likely that she did it in his name. However, the court's first decision indicates that the exchange between Ch'ang's grain and Lieh's land was perceived as a legal business transaction, and the widow's disposition of that piece of property was considered valid.

presumably because Yin-chih died without male sibling or offspring. When Yin-chih's mother Ms. Chou died, she left behind more than one million cash, which was supposed to go to Hsiao-hsü; this could be one of the reasons Hsiao-hsü was established as Yin-chih's heir. But Hsiao-hsü took none of the inheritance and gave it all to Yin-chih's sister who married a member of the Wang family from Lang-yeh. (Liang Shu, p. 739)

Where did Ms. Chou's property come from? Was it her dowry that was supposed to support her if she were widowed and would not remarry? Was the property under her son Yin-chih's name before he died? Or was it kept in her possession and could not be disposed of without her consent? Was there a law to protect a woman from being deprived of her property by her husband's male relatives? When Hsiao-hsü declined the property inheritance, he gave it to his nominal/adopted aunt who had already been married. Does it suggest that if no one was established as Yin-chih's heir before Ms. Chou died, the property would go to Ms. Chou's female offspring or whoever she preferred instead of becoming the community property of the Juan family?

So many questions yet so little information! But these cases reveal something about women's financial conditions in the Six Dynasties. In her married life, a woman lived and labored with her husband and managed the family property, which most probably was under his name. She may have had some private possession which came from part of her dowry, the gifts from her husband, or personal belongings such as jewels. However, most women seem to have had access to and disposition over larger amount of property only after they were widowed.

5. As Wives and Mothers

The limited restriction in defining a female role can be seen not only in the social realm but also in family life. Women in this period seem to have enjoyed the freedom of offering and receiving verbalized affection. Women could throw gifts into a handsome man's carriage on the street (Chin Shu, p. 1507). Intimate expression between marital partners may have been popular (see Ko Hung's detestation mentioned above). A husband would go outdoors to get the cold temperature of the winter in order to cool down his wife who suffered from a fever (Shih Shuo Hsin Yü, hereafter cited as SSHY, p. 243). Emotions between couples were sometimes expressed in an intimate yet frivolous manner. (YSCH, p. 60; SSHY, p. 245)

Love letters between husbands and wives were not uncommon. Kao Shih-yüan and his wife wrote poetry to each other to show their affection (Ch'üan-San-Kuo-Wen, 54/6b). Some sent gifts back to their wives when they were travelling away from home. Hsieh Hsüan sent his wife some fish he got and wrote that he hoped everything was peaceful at home (Hsieh Hsüan, "Yü-fu-shu"). Ch'in Chia sent his wife a mirror, a jeweled hairpin, fine perfume and a lute to "show his upset when they were apart." (Ch'in Chia, "Ch'ung-pao-ch'i-shu"). His wife replied that she had no desire to play with those things when he was not around and would only use the gifts together with him after he came home. (Hsü Shu, "Yu-pao-chia-shu")

Sometimes people asked well-known writers to compose passionate letters for them to send to their wives. This kind of letters, though full of idioms and symbols, rarely conveyed a realistic picture of married life (Yü Hsin, "Wei liang-shang-huang-hou-shih-tzu yü fu shu"; Ho Hsün, "Wei heng-shang-hou yü fu shu"; Fu Chih-tao, "Wei wang-k'uan yü fu i-an-chu shu"). Some letters, however, do show the practical side of the marital relationship. Ts'ai K'uo's wife sent K'uo a letter requesting summer clothing for the family when K'uo was away on official duty (Sung Shu, p. 1573). Kao Wen-hui's wife sent him an inventory letter saying that she had received cloth, shoes and socks from him. (Ms. Kao Jo, "Yü-fu wen-hui shu")

Practicality involved not only provision of food and clothing (as also revealed in the section of "Economic Activities") but also producing male offspring. A barren wife might not necessarily be divorced since her husband could take a concubine. But a wife did not want to face that kind of threat and competition either. Ch'en Su of the Eastern Chin (317-420) intended to take a concubine because he was married for ten years and still did not have a son. His wife prayed to the gods and is said to have conceived suddenly (Liu I-ch'ing, Yu-ming-lu, "Ch'en Su"). Praying for sons was probably pretty common in this period. Both Wang Min of the Eastern Chin and Sun Tao-te of the Liu-Sung did not have male offspring when they were getting old. Both couples prayed to the Bodhisattva Kuan-shih-yin, and both wives became pregnant and delivered sons later. (TPKC, 110/751, 110/757)

It is interesting to note that Kuan-shih-yin already had the image of helping women in their suffering, especially the pain of infertility. It is also revealing to see that all three cases cited above happened in the South. Perhaps it is not that the northern couples did not encounter problem of infertility or that the northern men refrained from divorcing their barren wives, but because the northern wives were socially more active and more capable of

maintaining their positions in the family.¹¹

According to Yen Chih-t'ui, northern women were not just inactively following the decisions and fates of their husbands and sons; they took a more active role in promoting the family's welfare. They took charge of the family business; they were involved in disputes and litigation, and initiated invitations and receptions. Their carriages filled the streets (note the similarities of this description to Ko Hung's); their dresses occupied the official courts. They even complained about grievances on behalf of their husbands and applied for official positions for their sons. (YSCH, p. 60)

Knowledgeable mothers not only provided food and clothing, but also took the responsibility to educate their children in elementary learning. Chung Hui's mother is said to have taught Hui the Classics of Filial Piety, the Analects, the Book of Poetry, the Book of Documents, the Book of Changes and the Book of Rites before Hui attended the national university at the age of fifteen (SKC, p. 785). Ms. Sung, mentioned earlier, taught her son personally during the night after she came back from firewood-gathering. He later became an official and she was appointed to lecture Chou Li for the national university in her eighties (CS, p. 2522). Ms. Ts'ui of the Northern Wei not only taught her son the Book of Poetry and Book of Ceremonial in his childhood, but also performed their loving relationship in front of an unfilial man. The man is said to have been deeply moved and became a filial son himself. (WS, pp. 978, 1980-1981, 1986)

Instruction by ways of acting was probably not uncommon. Sometimes widow mothers are portrayed to have refused eating in order to force their sons to mend their ways on ethical issues (WS, p. 1979). Although some historians suspect the popularity of such educational method, the instructional role of a mother to her son cannot be denied.¹²

In sum, women in this period were involved in various kinds of social and family roles, and those in the North appear to have been even more active than those in the South.

11. For a more comprehensive comparison between women's life in the North and that in the South, see Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV". The interpretations of such discrepancies involve, among other factors, cultural differences between the North and the South; they are discussed in Lee, 1992, "Chapter VI" and will not be repeated here in this short article.

12. Jennifer Holmgren suspects the credibility of these stories and suggests that Wei Shou, the author of *Wei Shu*, was using these cases of passive maternal instruction to promote widow chastity in the barbarized Northern Ch'i society. See Holmgren, 1981.

III. The Lives of Women--Based on Materials from Epitaphs

Women did enjoy certain freedoms in socio-economic activities in the Six Dynasties. However, the daily life of a woman, due to the lack of information, is hard to portray. Biographies of women in the standard histories often describe women with extraordinary rather than average life stories. To present a general picture of how women lived their lives, this section draws on the epitaph literature of the Six Dynasties period. Epitaph literature sometimes over-praised the deceased individual and made an idealized picture out of the person's life. But since the materials are used here to describe the stages rather than virtues these women had in their lives, hopefully, the problem of overstatement can be kept to a minimum level.

Nearly two hundred and seventy epitaphs are used to understand the pre-marital requirements of a girl and the general obligations of a wife as well as a widow. They are also used to calculate the average marriage age of women, usual age difference between a woman and her husband, the age a woman was widowed, the number of years she remained in widowhood, and her life expectancy. Since women in these epitaphs were mostly imperial consorts and officials' wives, the picture presented is still more about the life of an aristocratic woman than a commoner's wife. Moreover, with few exceptions, most epitaphs available are from the Northern Dynasties; therefore, this description reveals more of a northern woman's life than her southern sister's.

Readers should also note that due to the lack of materials, it is difficult to prove arguments by statistics when one studies traditional Chinese history. Therefore, the tables that summarize these cases are used more as a method of presentation than as numerical evidence. The real significance of these stories is still in the detailed narratives.¹³

¹³This section is inspired by Mao Han-kuang's article on T'ang women's family role. See Mao, 1991. Mao's article uses about three thousand and five hundred T'ang epitaphs to discuss the stages of a woman's life as a maiden, a wife, a head woman of the house, and a widow. Such an enormous amount of material, unfortunately, is so far not available for the study of the Six Dynasties. The comparatively small amount of epitaphs used in this section are mostly collected in Chao Wan-li, *Han Wei Nan-pei-ch'ao mu-chih-chi-shih*, 1956. Twenty five of them are from Chao ch'ao, *Han Wei Nan-pei-ch'ao mu-chih hui-pien*, 1992, pp.8-10; 12; 26-27; 56; 57; 71-72; 100-101; 131; 136-137; 153-154; 180-181; 301-303; 317; 319-320; 339-340; 347-348; 372-373; 382-383; 385; 414; 439-440; 454-455; 475; 475-478; 491-493. Two of them are from T'ao Tsung-i, *Ku-k'o ts'ung-ch'ao*, 8b-9a, 13b. One is from Huang Pen-chi, *Ku-chih shih-hua*, 4/1a. Six of them are from Yen K'o-chün ed. *Ch'üan Shang-ku San-tai Ch'in-Han San-kuo Liu-ch'ao wen: Chüan-Hou-Chou-Wen*, 14/3b-6a, 16/2b-3b, 18/1a-2a, 18/3ab, 18/5b-6a, 18/7b-8b, *Ch'üan-Liang-Wen* 50/11a-12a, and *Chüan-Chin-Wen*, 27/11b, 146/8a-9a. Two are from *Pei-ch'ao-mu-chih-yin-hua*. The other twelve epitaphs are new archaeological discoveries published in Kaogu, 1964:9, pp. 482-485, and Wen-wu, 1964:10, pp. 47-48; 1965:6, pp. 23, 26-33; 1965:12, pp. 21-27; 1966:4, p. 57; 1972:1, pp. 8-23; 1973:11, pp. 27-33; 1985:10, pp. 42-58; 1985:11, pp. 1-20; 1991:8, pp. 85-90. This author realizes that there are several more epitaphs than those are collected here through reading Wang Chuang-hung's *Liu-ch'ao mu-chih chien-yao*. However, since some of the inscriptions are not available at the point of writing, they are not used in this article.

Table 1 shows that most women married between fourteen and eighteen. Four of the eleven women who married later than twenty-one years old became successor wives. It suggests that older girls were probably not as desirable in the marriage market as teenagers. Before marriage, a girl's education often indicates the aim of making her a better person instead of only a suitable wife in the future. Many epitaphs show that pre-nuptial education included not only needle work, but also classical learning. Women's epitaphs in the T'ang period indicate that pre-nuptial education was usually related to and geared toward wifely virtues (Mao, 1991, pp. 186-195). Although books for female virtue cultivation such as those by Pan Chao and others were sometimes mentioned in epitaphs in this period, many other types of learning without distinctly female nature were also mentioned.

TABLE 1 Women's Average Marriage Age

age	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	24	25	27	30	1147
no.	2	2	1	7	18	2	10	5	4	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	66
average																	17.4

Note: Sixty-six of the two hundred and sixty-nine epitaphs mention the marriage age of the women; six of them were "successor wives." These six women were married at 18, 19, 22, 25, 27, and 30. Without including these six women, the average marriage age would be 16.8.

As discussed in the previous section, many women were learned in history and poetry; some were talented in literature composition and calligraphy (MCCS, 4/27a, 4/35b-36a, 7/72a, 9/103a, 10/110a). Yüan Chün-i's epitaph says that in addition to skillful needle work, she could read and very well understand the Book of Poetry, the Book of Documents and the Records of Rites when she was a girl (she married the first time at the age of fifteen). (MCCS, 4/28a)

Table 2 shows that age difference between husband and wife in this period varied pretty much individually. Although many women married men about seven to ten years older, a practice not much different from what the Classics prescribed, it was not uncommon for women to marry younger men. History suggests that Hsien-pi imperial princes commonly took wives older than themselves (WS, pp. 1073-1075). Among the five women who married younger men, Ch'ang Chi-fan, once a palace prisoner due to family collective responsibility, married an imperial prince eight years younger than she was (MCCS, 4/34b-35a). Others were either northern aristocratic women (MCCS, 7/68b, 7/70b), or a District Magistrate's wife

from the Southern Liang dynasty (MCCS, 9/103a). It seems reasonable to assume that there was no fixed age difference between husband and wife in the perception of contemporaries, be he a northern aristocrat or a southern local official. The deviation from Confucian norms, therefore, existed.

TABLE 2 Age Difference Between Husband and Wife

years husband older than wife	-8	-5	-4	-1	0	1	2	3	4	7	8	
no.	1	1	1	2	4	2	2	2	1	3	1	

yrs.	9	10	12	14	20	21	23	29	31	32	34	total
no.	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	34
average												8.6

Note: Only thirty-four of the epitaphs have information useful for calculating the age difference between husband and wife. Women who married as successor wives were usually much younger than their husbands: either 12, 20, 23, or 29 years younger in this table. If they are not included, the average difference will be 6.9 years.

Once married, a woman was expected to fulfill many different roles. She was a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother (a biological mother of her children, a legal mother of the children from her husband's concubines, or a step-mother) and sister-in-law of her husband's siblings. She was to prepare food and clothing for her family. She was to serve her in-laws. In addition to material provision, her manner in serving was important. She would be praised if she was gentle and obedient (MCCS, 2/8b, 6/58a), diligent (MCCS, 4/34b-35a), and respectful (MCCS, 4/37a, 4/40a, 5/49b-50a). In governing the house, a thrifty personality would be applauded (MCCS, 4/35b, 5/49b-50a, 7/107b-108a). The ability to integrate family members, especially to bring her natal and marital families together harmoniously, would be extolled (MCCS, 3/16a; 3/20a, 4/28a, 4/32a, 4/33b, 5/41ab, 5/49b-50a, 5/52a). Her most important task, however, was still to bear and educate children.

Childbirth could be painful and dangerous. There were medical texts written in this period to show the methods of protecting the fetus and helping women recover from childbirth.¹⁴ However, premature birth and infant mortality still caused suffering for the mothers (MCCS, 4/32b, 9/99b). Hsüeh Hui-ming of the Northern Wei died of a delivery-related illness after two of her infant babies died (MCCS, 4/32b). The comparatively high mortality rate between the age of sixteen and thirty shown in Table 5 indicates that the childbirth period was a dangerous stage women went through. Those who had endured childbirth successfully would not be forgotten. Ms. Tu of the Eastern Wei (534-550) bore seven sons and six daughters. The author of her epitaph praised her for being a great mother. (MCCS, 3/16b)

Although many women are said to have acquired classical learning in their natal families, epitaph materials, unlike the standard histories, did not specify the knowledge that they transmitted to their children. Many women were praised for being capable of educating and disciplining their children and their nephews in the household. However, most compliments were phrased in abstract form. (MCCS, 2/6a, 4/26a, 4/32a, 7/72a)

Barren wives or step-mothers, however, had to face tougher decisions. Jealousy was an impressive phenomenon in this period (Liu, 1991, pp. 27-34; Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV"). Women who were not jealous would get a special note in their epitaphs. Usually, the most important feature of "being not jealous" was to accept the existence of "another woman." Feng Ling-hua was praised for not being jealous because she raised children for her husband's concubine as if they were her own (MCCS, 4/27ab). Meng Ching-hsün acquired the same reputation by allowing her husband to take concubines so that his family could prosper. She was perhaps infertile herself (MCCS, 5/49b-50a). K'o Ch'iao's successor wife née Hsüeh was extolled because she took care of the children from Ch'iao's first wife and treated them nicely (MCCS, 7/78a). To evaluate the success of a woman's child-rearing, her sons' official success and her daughters' fine virtues would be mentioned in her epitaph. (MCCS, 7/70b, 7/72a, 7/77b)

Sixteen of the epitaphs indicate the average age when a woman was widowed; most of them were over forty years old (see Table 3). The thirty-eight epitaphs used in Table 4 show that widows spent an average of 18.6 years in widowhood. Although most widows in those epitaphs did not remarry, it was probably not because of chastity concern but because of the comparatively old age when they were widowed. Most of them may have passed the

14. At least two books of this kind are recorded in *Sui Shu*, p. 1047.

childbirth age. Such a pattern suggests that remarriage for widowed women was basically to establish another family and to have children, not just to obtain emotional companionship from a spouse. Historical studies show that widow remarriage was not uncommon in this period even though it went against classical teaching (Tung, 1934; Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV"). That is probably why epitaph authors often attributed widow remarriage to social pressure instead of the widow's personal will, although many remarriages appear to have been harmonious (MCCS, 3/20a, 4/27a, 4/28a; also see Lee, 1992, "Chapter IV").

TABLE 3 Average Age a Woman was Widowed

age	26	27	30s	31	33	40	42	45	47	48	50s	53	54	642
no.	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	16
average														40.1

TABLE 4 Years in Widowhood

yrs.	1	2	3	5	6	8	9	10	12	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
no.	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	1	2

yrs.	21	24	25	30	32	33	48	57	60s	705
no.	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	38
average										18.6 yrs.

Yüan Chün-t'uo, mentioned earlier, was married the first time at the age of fifteen and was widowed with a daughter probably before she was twenty. Her epitaph says that her brother "went against her righteousness and deprived her of affection" by forcing her to remarry as a successor wife. The description of her second marital life suggests no difference between the first and the second marriage. She enjoyed intimate affection from her husband; she served his mother with propriety, and treated his children from his first wife "better than her own." But since there is no indication that she bore any more children, her only daughter from the first marriage may have been the child the epitaph author referred

to.

Chün-t'ao was widowed again when she was forty and decided to become a Buddhist nun. At the age of fifty-five, she died in the villa of her daughter's son (MCCS, 4/28a). The fact that she died in her grandson's house suggests little or no support from her second marital family and a strong tie between Chün-t'ao and her married daughter. The picture makes one wonder about the adjustments and pains she must have endured in her eventful life. That she died as a Buddhist nun seems to indicate some awakening to spiritual comfort in her old age.

Not all elderly widows became Buddhist nuns, but many did devote their time and energy to Buddhism. Some practiced Buddhist worship and meditation because it was the religion of their natal families. Ms. Chao of the Northern Ch'i donated all her property to a Buddhist treasury in her will. Annotations for her epitaph say that the name of her father Chao P'an-hu appeared earlier on a pagoda inscription, which indicates her family tradition of supporting Buddhist institutions. (MCCS, 5/70b, 7/70b)

Some women's devotion was a response to life-long struggles. Erh-chu Yüan-ching was orphaned in young age. As the oldest child in her family, she took care of her younger brothers and sisters. Her epitaph says that she loved them like a mother and disciplined them like a father. She was married and had at least two sons. But she was widowed around forty years old and her two boys also died later. She finally "severed (the chain of) affection and deserted worries." It is hard to tell whether she became a Buddhist nun or not, but there is no question that she devoted the rest of her life to Buddhist faith and died in her seventies.¹⁵ It is often considered by Chinese that the most tragic life is to be orphaned in youth, widowed in mid-life and to lose one's child in old age. Since Erh-chu Yüan-ching experienced all these pains, Buddhism seems to have been the appropriate solution at the end of her suffering life.

The ever-changing nature of life did inspire many women in their old age, but few of them really relieved themselves from earthly obligations. Ms. Li's epitaph is the only one that verifies her abandoning household responsibilities and concentrating on Buddhist learning (MCCS, 11/117b). Others seem to have either integrated their Buddhist knowledge with classical learning or cultivated their faith along with Confucian virtuous behavior.

¹⁵Due to the condition of the inscription, the year of her death is hard to tell. But the epitaph was inscribed in A.D. 564. If that was when she passed away, she had lived to seventy-two years of age. MCCS, 7/72a.

Cheng Shan-fei is said to have been well-versed in Classics and history. Later she also studied and circulated Buddhist sutra to spread her religion (MCCS, 9/108a). Hsüeh Hui-min who died of childbirth related disease is said to have been devout in Buddhism and excellent in needle work. Ms. Feng was praised as a righteous and loving mother while at the same time was a fervent believer in Mahayana Buddhism (MCCS, 4/32b, 4/35b). Tao Kuei is said to have realized the impermanence and ignorance of the world and to understand how life passed away as easily as water-bubbles. Therefore, she was converted to Buddhism, and she supported Buddhist temples. But the epitaph author did not overlook her propriety and diligence in the family; he praised her for being a righteous wife and a chaste widow. (MCCS, 8/86b-87a)

In the end, Buddhism seems to have comforted these women in their widowed years; it provided outlets for their time, energy as well as financial resources. As Table 5 indicates, most women had a good chance to live up to fifty years old, if they had survived the danger of childbirth during their twenties and thirties.

TABLE 5 Women's Life Expectancy

age	12	13	14	16	17	18	19	20		
no.	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	16	
age	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
no.	3	3	1	2	1	2	3	1	5	6
age	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	
no.	1	2	2	4	2	3	4	7	1	
age	41	42	43	45	47	48	49	50		
no.	2	4	1	2	2	1	3	2	17	
age	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
no.	1	3	5	1	5	4	4	4	5	2
age	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70
no.	1	2	3	5	4	9	4	3	1	5
age	71	72	73	74	75	77	78	80		
no.	3	6	2	2	4	1	3	5	26	
age	81	83	85	86	87	89	90	91	93	94
no.	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
average										51.7 yrs

Note: One hundred and ninety-six epitaphs contain information about these women's ages. The average life expectancy was 52.0 years old. But if the 16 women who died before 20 are not included, the average would be 54.7. The figures suggest that if she lived through the danger of childbirth in her 20s and 30s, she had a good chance to live up to 55 years old.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Such was the general picture of women's life in the Six Dynasties. The life of an average peasant woman is so far not well understood. Therefore, it is hard to evaluate the extent the classical norms diffused down into the lower levels of the society with regard to female ethics. The above discussion, however, suggests several points about the aristocratic women. First, with few exceptions, marriage was still the norm for a woman's career. She prepared food and clothing for her husband's family, and took the responsibility of bearing and raising children. There was no disagreement with the classical teaching in this regard.

Second, however, a married woman could still enjoy certain social freedoms. Gender segregation was not successfully enforced, and a northern wife's function was not confined within the household either. She would take actions trying to better the careers of her husband and son, instead of passively following their official fate. Many women shared the financial burdens with their husbands and may have had control over property, both chattel and real estate.

Third, when they were married, their conjugal life demonstrated affection and liveliness. Once they were widowed, remarriage was accepted, sometimes expected from young widows, although most elderly widows devoted their attention more to Buddhist faith than to worldly relations. The picture delineated above thus suggests that without failing the responsibilities as wives and mothers, women in this period played a larger role in family, enjoyed social and ideological alternatives, and displayed vigor in their lives.



1. Collecting mulberry leaves



2. Cultivating the fields

Figure I

Women's Economic Activities in Wei-Chin Brick Paintings



3. Getting water from a well



4. Preparing poultry

Figure I continued

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GLOSSARY

An-ling-shou	安令首	Kao Wen-hui	高文惠
Chao P'an-hu	趙槃虎	K'ai-shan temple	開善寺
Ch'ang Chi-fan	常季繁	Kuan-shih-yin	觀世音
Ch'en-liu	陳留	Li Hung-chih	李洪之
Cheng Shan-fei	鄭善妃	Lang-yeh	瑯琊
Cheng Shan-kuo	鄭善果	Lo-yang	洛陽
chi-li	計吏	Lu K'un	盧壺
chia-feng	家風	Ms. Lou	婁氏
chia-hsüeh	家學	Pao Lao-shou	抱老壽
chiang-tung	江東	Pei-pu-tu-yu	北部督郵
Ch'en Su	陳素	P'ing-teng temple	平等寺
Ch'in Chia	秦嘉	san-chi-ch'ang-shih	散騎常侍
Chiu-ch'üan	酒泉	san-pao	三寶
Chung-li I	鍾離意	Sun Ch'ang	孫敞
Erh-chu Yüan-ching	爾朱元靜	Sun Tao-te	孫道德
Fa-hsüan	法宣	T'ao Ch'ien	陶潛
Feng K'ai	封愷	T'ao Kuei	陶貴
Feng Ling-hua	馮令華	Ts'ai K'uo	蔡廓
Fu Chien	符堅	Ts'ui Hao	崔浩
fu-jung	婦容	Ts'ui Hsiao-fen	崔孝芬
fu-kung	婦工	Ts'ui Kuang	崔光
fu-te	婦德	Wang Min	王珉
fu-yen	婦言	Wang Seng-ju	王僧孺
Han Lan-yin	韓蘭英	Wei Chen	衛臻
Ho-hsi	河西	Yao-kuang temple	瑤光寺
Hsia-hou Ching	夏侯景	yeh-hsia	鄴下
Hsiao Tao-ch'eng	蕭道成	Yuan Ch'un-t'uo	元純陀
Hsieh Hsüan	謝玄	Yuan Yu	元祐
Hsüeh Hui-ming	薛慧命	Yuan Yung	元永
Hsüeh Po-hui	薛伯微		
Juan Hsiao-hsü	阮孝緒		
Juan Yin-chih	阮胤之		
Kansu	甘肅		
Kao Huan	高歡		
Kao Shih-yüan	高士元		

六朝婦女生活

李貞德*

(中文摘要)

本文採用正史，文學作品，考古資料和墓誌銘等史料探討六朝婦女生活。首先陳述先秦典籍與六朝士人所要求、提倡的婦德與婦教內容，然後描繪六朝婦女處在社交、教育、經濟和家庭生活中的情況。最後，利用約兩百五十個婦女的墓誌銘討論一般貴族婦女的婚齡、大婦年差、守寡年歲和年數，以及婦女壽年。從本文的討論可知：雖然六朝婦女仍以主中饋和生養子女的婚姻生活為重心，其活動範圍卻不限於家庭之中。男女之防既不嚴格，六朝婦女便享有相當自由參加社交活動。其婚姻生活展現夫妻親密之情。在教養子女和分擔家庭財務責任方面，婦女亦多參與。而北朝婦女更是藉著爭訟屈直、造請逢迎拓展自己在家庭以外的作用。年輕的寡婦再嫁雖為當時人所認可，但是年長的寡婦則大多將心思物力投注於佛教信仰之上。總之，六朝婦女既不虧負為人妻母的責任，又能參與社交、教育和經濟的活動，其生活呈現了豐富的多樣性與活力。

關鍵詞：六朝，婦女，生活，墓誌銘

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The Life of Women in the Six Dynasties

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(Abstract)

This article shows the agreement and discrepancy between classical teaching and social practice with regard to women's life in the Six Dynasties. It first examines the precepts of female propriety prescribed in the Classics and promulgated by contemporary scholars, then depicts a more realistic picture of a woman's social, educational, economic and family life. It portrays the average life of women in the Six Dynasties, applying not only the standard histories, but also archaeological materials, epitaphs, and contemporary literature. Several points are made here. First, marriage was the norm for a woman's career. She prepared food and clothing for her husband's family, and took the responsibility of bearing and raising children. Second, however, a married woman could still enjoy certain social freedom. Gender segregation was not successfully enforced: conjugal life in this period demonstrated affection and liveliness, and a northern wife's function was not confined within the household. Third, remarriage for widows was accepted, although most elderly widows devoted their attention more to Buddhist faith than to worldly relations. The picture thus suggests that without failing the responsibilities as wives and mothers, women in this period played a larger role in family, enjoyed social and ideological alternatives, and displayed vigor in their lives.

Key Words: women 、 Six Dynasties 、 history of life 、 epitaphs.

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