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**Confucianism: How *Analects* Promoted Patriarchy and Influenced the  
Subordination of Women in East Asia**

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History 105

Gavotte

## Introduction

Primary sources provide historians insight into how people used to live and are vital to understanding the past. Primary sources are sources of information-artifacts, books, art, and more- that were created close to the time period they are about and by someone who lived in proximity to that period. Primary sources can be first hand accounts, original data, or direct knowledge and their contents are analyzed by historians to draw conclusions about the past. There are many fields where scholars use different forms of primary sources; for example, archaeologists study artifacts while philologists study language. Historiography, the study of historical writing, is integral to world history, because studying primary sources from around the globe helps foster a global perspective and shows integration and differences cross culturally. Primary sources are essential for historians to draw information from to compose secondary sources.

The study of primary source documents is critical to understanding former governments, nations, people, culture, ways of life, architecture, violence and more. Confucius' book *Analects* is an example of an extremely significant document, because it helps historians understand the origin of Chinese philosophy and the role of women in society. The collection of sayings impacted the fundamental design of social structure, government, culture and values throughout history. *Analects* is influential because the patriarchy promoted and the roles assigned to women influenced female infanticide and the lives of women, in East Asia, for over 2,000 years and it continues to influence the modern world.

## Confucius' Life and the Influence of *Analects*

The period of Warring States occurred, after the Spring and Autumn period, during the late centuries of the Zhou Dynasty. The Period of Warring States (403-221 BCE) was defined by political turmoil as feuding Chinese kingdoms fought to retain and gain control over more territory. However, the Qin state became the most powerful and ultimately conquered the other seven major states in China, becoming -the first unified Chinese empire- the Qin dynasty. The years of violence and disorder urged people to consider the nature of society and humanity and gave rise to three influential schools of thought: Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism.

Confucius, or Kong Fuzi, was born into an Aristocratic family in the state of Lu in 551 BCE near the end of the Spring and Autumn Period.<sup>1</sup> He was China's first self-conscious teacher and thinker to address political and social order. Confucius held several medial government positions then devoted himself to his studies and mastering the arts in order to become an educator. Confucius continued his political mission by serving as a tutor for men who wanted to work in government positions. After establishing his style of education as a tool for self cultivation and character building he gained recognition and was appointed the minister of Justice in Lu (a vassal state during the Chinese Zhou dynasty).<sup>2</sup> However, his policies were not accepted by his superiors so he left Lu and spent nearly thirteen years traveling from state to state urging rulers to put his ideas to practice. None of the rulers were willing to appoint Confucius, yet he established a large following and returned to Lu to continue teaching and writing. Confucius insisted his pupils examine poetry and literature from the Zhou dynasty and such texts became essential to the Chinese educational system and to students seeking government positions for the next 2,000 years.

Confucius died in 479 BCE and his disciples compiled *Analects*, a book of his conversations, lessons, and sayings relating to philosophy, education, politics, and ethics.<sup>3</sup> The number of sayings in *Analects* that come directly from Confucius is questioned because the concept of individual authorship was not established, at the time it was published, so it is difficult to decipher which parts are from Confucius and which parts were invented by his pupils.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the text is difficult to understand because Confucius used pre-existing words and redefined them to create a unique, philosophical vocabulary.

Throughout his lifetime, Confucius attempted to spread his ideas to leaders across China and he hoped that his principles would influence them to cultivate moral integrity and the capacity to make fair judgements. His work focused on ethics and political character, yet he avoided answering obscure philosophical dilemmas. In addition, Confucius believed religious questions could not be answered by through human intelligence. *Analects* intended to influence the same audience of leaders because it emphasized important characteristics government officials should have and it defined the structure of society. *Analects* was also intended for the

general population because it explained individuals roles in different relationships and showed the importance for everyone to live according to high ethical standards.

*Analects* is divided into twenty different sections that consist of quotes from the master. The chapters all have a different focus; however, the main terms throughout the book are *xiào*, *ren*, *li*, *jen*, *yi*, *tao*, and *te*. Primarily, filial piety, *xiào* is the idea that society is based on relationships and that individuals must understand their place and selflessly submit themselves to authority.<sup>5</sup> *Ren* describes courtesy, respect, diligence and loyalty. Another key aspect of Confucius' social philosophy is the concept of *li* which defines social responsibilities as a ritual. *Jen*, humaneness, is the internalization of *li* and "means all of the moral qualities expressed in the behavior of ideal human beings toward one another".<sup>6</sup> According to Confucius, *Jen* is an essential characteristic for government officials, because it is the combination of courtesy, respect, selflessness, diligence and loyalty. Similarly, *yi* is the application of *li*, because it represents individual's duty to participate in ritual. *Tao* means way and is reflected in society's ability to function according to ritual. Lastly, *te*, integrity, is achieved by following *Tao*. Confucius aimed to restore social and political order in China and he hoped the application his teachings would create *junzi*, "the gentleman".

The terms Confucius used to explain his thought influenced China for over two thousand years because they were adapted by his disciples and reinterpreted throughout time. Mencius was a fourth century B.C.E Chinese philosopher who was taught orthodox Confucian values by Confucius' grandson, Zisi. He consulted with and advised rulers during the Period of Warring States and, focusing on the Confucian virtue of *ren*, encouraged rulers to be benevolent, to maintain peace, to impose fair taxes, and to offer education. Additionally, he composed *Mencius*, a collection of sayings on human nature, which became one of the most influential texts to Confucianism and greatly influenced neo-Confucianists during the Song dynasty.

Secondly, Xunzi was a prominent disciple of Confucius who contributed to the integration of Confucian principles into society. Xunzi emphasized *li* because he thought standards of conduct were necessary to prevent selfishness. He believed it was important to establish social rituals because it would encourage people to contribute to society, rather than to focus own personal interests. Confucianism has been adapted by many philosophers and

applied to many aspects of government, society, and relationships; thus, Confucianism has remained prevalent for many years and has contributed to many historical events and traditions.

Confucius grew up in a patriarchal society: men were viewed as the head of the family, men completed rituals, and sacrifices were always made to patrilineal ancestors. *Analects* has a similar patriarchal view about the structure of society. Confucius defined social structure in terms of relationships and filial piety was his solution to restore stability in China after the Period of Warring States. In patriarchal societies men yield more authority than women in political and social relationships; thus, Confucius contributed to the subordination of women, because he emphasized the importance of understanding one's place in relationships and not questioning nor attempting to alter it. Furthermore, *Analects* values men by advising children to serve their fathers and granting men authority to lead ancestral worship, however "the importance of the female is reduced to her success in perpetuating the family by producing a male heir".<sup>7</sup>

Confucius' sayings about women were demeaning and suggested that women were inferior. Book seventeen includes a quote from the master saying "It's women and small minded men that are impossible to nurture. If you're close and familiar with them they lose all humility. If you keep your distance, they're full of resentment".<sup>8</sup> Equating women to "small minded men" suggests that women are petty and difficult to interact with. The passage also suggests that men should be apprehensive of becoming close to women. Male dominance was also applied cultural practices. For example, sayings in *Analects* insisted that music must be proper and musicians must be virtuous; thus, men concluded they were more capable and assumed superiority in the realm of music.<sup>9</sup>

The patriarchy promoted and the roles assigned to women in *Analects* influenced the lives of women for over 2,000 years. Confucian traditions published in *Analects* established a distinct separation of genders and assigned different roles to men and women. When King Wu spoke of his satisfaction and pride in the work his ten ministers, Confucius replied "since one was his mother, Wu you really only had nine ministers".<sup>10</sup> This story from *Analects* proves that Confucius isolated women from the realm of government and civil service and indicates that women were not worthy of societal affairs nor capable of serving in important positions.<sup>11</sup> This

created a gender distinction where females were restricted to the inner sphere and males to the outer sphere:

Women are assigned to handle the domestic affairs such as nurturing the children, cooking, weaving and other household work. Men, on the other hand, handle public and social affairs such as farming, commerce and, for some men, holding government office.<sup>12</sup>

The Confucian gender distinction has influenced the modern day expectation for women to have children and stop working once they get married. Women's domestic role fosters greater dependency on males, because women are confined to their homes and are reliant on the income of their husbands and fathers.<sup>13</sup> This exclusion of women from the workforce remains a problem in modern day East Asia because most “working women are in secretarial or other minor posts that hold almost no chance of promotion into the higher ranks of the corporate world...only 9% of management positions in Japan and South Korea are held by women”.<sup>14</sup>

The discrimination of women in the teachings in *Analects* instituted a legacy of isolation of women from culture, politics, education, the workforce and more. Confucianism created a patriarchal society where women were powerless against their husbands and fathers, were not allowed to participate in public life, and could not inherit property nor carry on the family name.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, society viewed women as a financial burden and the birth of baby girls was a source of grief and shame for families. As a result, female infanticide became widely practiced. The social practice of female infanticide was described as early as the late Qin dynasty in *Hanfeizi*. The text, *Hanfeizi*, introduced female infanticide as a way to prevent wasting family resources, because there were few long term benefits to raising daughters.

China's one child policy further popularized female infanticide and sex-selective abortion. The population control measure was passed in 1979 and it influenced many couples to either terminate their pregnancy or kill their baby after birth, if it was a girl. Parents did not want their one opportunity to raise a child to be used on a girl because they knew girls could scarcely contribute to the economic well-being of their family.<sup>16</sup> Confucianism has influenced the regularity of female infanticide in East Asia over the past 2,000 years and it is now predicted that as a result of sex-selective infanticide and abortions there will be thirty million more men than women in China in 2020.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, female infanticide has become a social problem because it created a significant gender imbalance:

Researchers have calculated an average sex ratio at birth in China of 118.06 males to 100 females, based on national census data from 2010, in comparison to ratios in industrialized countries from 103 to 107 males for every 100 females.<sup>18</sup>

Subordination of women also contributed to concubinage in East Asia. Concubinage is defined as an ongoing relationship that involves sex and cohabitation, but the two people in the relationship are unable to marry. The woman is the concubine and she is regarded as inferior to the male and to his legal wife. Beginning in pre-modern East Asia, men took concubines when their wives were unable to produce male children. Concubines were supposed to help the principal wife, however because they could not marry they never earned a social place. Concubinage shows how determined families were to have male children. Additionally, concubines' lives prove the exclusion of women from society, because their sole purpose was to reproduce and because they were unable to marry, concubines never earned a social place in society.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Confucian ideas concerning marriage and family loyalty contributed to the practice of *minghun*. Minghun, also known as “ghost marriage”, is the Chinese cultural custom of afterlife marriage. Traditionally, minghun has occurred numerous ways, including when the male and female are deceased as well as when one partner is still living and the other is dead. During minghun parents find a spouse to bury with their child, if they died unmarried. Minghun was considered a duty for parents to ensure their sons happiness in the afterlife, yet occasionally parents of unmarried daughters arranged afterlife marriages so that their daughter would have a place in society. The term ghost bride refers specifically to the woman involved in afterlife marriages for deceased males. Due to the gender gap caused by female infanticide there were fewer available bride's than bachelors, which meant more men died unmarried. Hua-Lun Huang describes the consequences of this gender inequality, “since this custom creates a high demand market...for female corpses, it motivates some outlaws to abduct and murder young women in order to supply fresh and first-rate ghost brides to people who want to find a spouse for their deceased son”.<sup>20</sup>

Jim Yardley from the *New York Times* investigated the modern day practice of ghost marriages in villages in Loess Plateau, an area of canyons along the Yellow River, in China. Yardley proved the relevance of Confucian teachings in the twenty-first century, “None of the



people interviewed considered the custom shameful or overly macabre. Instead, it was described as a parental duty to a lost child that reflected Confucian values about loyalty to family.”<sup>21</sup> The villages in the plateau are underdeveloped and unreachable by roads, so many members of the young generations flee to other areas of China and never return. As a result, it is becoming more difficult for males to find a wife before they die. Due to villagers traditional application of Confucian teachings and the increased number of unmarried men, *minghun* is still commonly practiced and ghost wives are extremely sought after. For example, a family could spend \$1,200, nearly four years of a village farmer’s income, searching for a female corpse.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, people have been found robbing graves to procure bones to use in marriage ceremonies. The modern day practice of finding ghost wives for unmarried male family members shows the patriarchy of Chinese society, because it reveals that, even after death, males yield extreme authority and that families always prioritize male’s happiness. Therefore, the patriarchy promoted by Confucius over two thousand years ago continues to be influential.

Furthermore, *Analects* influenced the publication of *Women’s Analects*, or *Nü Lunyu*, which applied Confucianism specifically to women. The Four Books for Women, a compilation of books that aimed to educate young women, included *Admonitions for Women*, *Women’s Analects*, *Domestic Lessons*, and *Sketch of a Model for Women*.<sup>23</sup> *Women’s Analects* was written in the late eighth century by the Tang dynasty scholars, Song Ruoxin and Song Ruo Zhao. The text describes proper attitudes and behavior for women and was integral to women’s education in premodern China. *Women’s Analects* describes an extremely oppressive lifestyle that was taught to many girls because it was one of the only texts for women. The lessons written by the Song sisters were influenced by Confucian notions and consist of sections about learning to work, learning proper etiquette, household work, serving one’s husband and his family, managing the household, caring for children and more.<sup>24</sup> *Women’s Analects* defines marriage as:

Women leave their families to marry, and the husband is the master of the household... The husband is to be firm, the wife soft; conjugal affections follow from this. While at home, the two of you should treat each other with the formality and reserve of a guest. Listen carefully to and obey whatever your husband tells you.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the text says sons will go to school, yet daughters are not allowed to go out and will be taught domestic tasks. *Analects* prompted the publication of *Women’s Analects* and together they outlined a repressive, domestic, isolated, and powerless life for women.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, Zhu Xi, an influential philosopher from the Post Classical Era, was committed to Confucian values. Following the Tang dynasty, the Song Dynasty thrived from 960-1279 C.E. and rulers focused on civil administration, industry, education, and the arts more than they focused on military affairs. The Song dynasty had an extremely patriarchal social structure; for example, veneration of patrilineal ancestors was elaborate, and the practice of foot binding was established, which restricted women's movement. New agricultural methods, industrial development, the emergence of market economy, the establishment of Buddhism, and neo-Confucianism also defined the Song dynasty. The revival of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty led to neo-Confucianism (Confucianism with the added influence of Buddhist ideas such as logic and metaphysics). Neo-Confucianism prompted a decline in the status of women, fostered the seclusion of women, and limited women's right to divorce and remarry.<sup>27</sup> Zhu Xi (1130-1200 C.E.) was the most prominent Song Neo-Confucian and he published *Family Rituals*, a guide to Chinese Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites.

Zhu Xi's manual was popular because people wanted a reliable guide to ensure they were performing rituals correctly, and the same way everyone else was; therefore, *Family Rituals* "facilitated the standardization of Chinese ritual behavior and thereby helped shape some key conceptions about cosmic and social order".<sup>28</sup> Like Confucius, Zhu Xi believed individuals must live accordance to their position in their family and in society. Zhu Xi's work revived and expanded Confucian ideas on rituals and filial piety, encouraging patriarchy and female submission in the Song dynasty. For example, he opposed women's property rights and women's ownership of dowry.<sup>29</sup> In addition, *Family Rituals* granted males the authority to lead ceremonies and ancestral worship toward patrilineal ancestors. Lastly, Zhu Xi contributed to the rise of the "cult of chastity". Zhu Xi suppressed women by supporting widow fidelity and explaining that remarriage after the death of one's husband results in loss of integrity. The influence of Zhu Xi's teachings led Song men to base female virtue on widow chastity and spousal fidelity.<sup>30</sup> *Family Rituals* exemplifies the impact of *Analects* on the subordination of women in East Asia because Zhu Xi's revival of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty "strengthened patrilineal and patriarchal ideology, and in the process buttressed a family system in which women were disadvantaged".<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

*Analects* established social and political stability after the Period of Warring States and was influential to many aspects of Chinese life. *Analects* is vital for historians to understand the history of East Asia, because it provides the teachings of Confucius that impacted social structure, government, virtue, education, values and gender roles for over 2,000 years. Confucius' sayings that address ethical cultivation and the importance moral character continue to shape lifestyle of people in East Asia today. He also introduced the concept of society as a web of relationships and proved that if everyone functions according to their position in relationships, it would enable society to operate efficiently. This concept of filial piety contributed to the patriarchal nature of East Asian societies and influenced the oppression of women that is still apparent in the twenty-first century.

Confucius created a separation of gender that assigned women the domestic role and granted men the superiority to handle public affairs; thus, *Analects* can be used to study the origins of women's exclusion from the workforce. Even in the twenty-first century "women's increasing level of economic activity in East Asia does not appear to have accompanied increases in men's domestic roles: housework and childrearing remain primarily women's work".<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, *Analects* influenced the publication of texts, such as *Family Rituals* and *Analects for Women*, that were similarly patriarchal and limited women's rights. Additionally, the subordination of women that was supported in *Analects*, created a society where women were not valued and resulted in the practice of female-infanticide. Finally, Confucianism contributed to concubinage and ghost marriages. *Analects* and the application of Confucianism offers historians an opportunity to study of how women in East Asia were treated in the past and helps explain why women continue to be isolated from the workforce and why sex-selective abortion and other practices are still an issue.

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