

From the Perspective of Social Gender: Married Women in the Qin and Han Dynasties — Based on Unearthed Documents

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ABSTRACT

The development of social gender awareness during the Qin and Han Dynasties can be divided into three stages: the theoretical construction period, the preliminary development period, and the flourishing period. These stages are exemplified by three female protagonists from the Peking University Collection of Qin Slips, Western Han Bamboo Books, and Han Yuefu poetry, respectively. This paper explores the process of married women's autonomous struggles within the context of increasing social gender awareness.

KEYWORDS

social gender awareness; married women; unearthed documents

Social gender refers to the unequal social status between men and women and is a widely used analytical category in international academia. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argued that gender differences are not determined biologically but are the result of social and cultural constructions. Female traits reflect the construction and expectations of gender norms^[1].

History has largely been recorded by men, and texts such as *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (Lienü Zhuan) and *Lessons for Women* (Nüjie) often confine their conclusions to "servitude education" and "labor education," failing to fully depict the gender roles of women in the Qin and Han Dynasties. However, unearthed bamboo and wooden slips that document women's legal rights provide new perspectives for research. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, social gender awareness gradually increased, and the construction of female roles reflected a negotiation between self-awareness and societal expectations.

1 Theoretical Construction Period in the Qin and Early Han Dynasties: The Husband Goes to War

The Qin and Han Dynasties marked the initial formation of social gender constructs, with "divorce due to childlessness" (wuzichuqi) and "taking concubines" (nàqiè) becoming two oppressive constraints on married women. However, these restrictions were not universally accepted at the outset, and some Qin and Han literary works portray women's courageous resistance. In the Peking University Collection of Qin Slips, the protagonist "Qian" from *The Husband Goes to War* opposes her husband's interactions with a widow and strives to save their marriage. Similarly, the Western Han Bamboo Books' Wang Ji depict a noblewoman who bravely advises her husband and parents-in-law against taking a concubine. Meanwhile, the heroine of *Gathering Miwu on the Hillside*, though highly skilled, is abandoned for being childless. These female figures serve as representative examples of married women in the Qin and Han Dynasties, reflecting the evolution of social gender structures across three developmental stages.

Qin and Early Han Dynasties — Theoretical Construction Period: *The Husband Goes to War*.

Early to Late Western Han — Preliminary Development Period: Wang Ji.

Late Western Han to the End of the Eastern Han — Flourishing Period: *Gathering Miwu on the Hillside*.

The differing attitudes toward "divorce due to childlessness" and "taking concubines" seen in *The Husband Goes to War*, Wang Ji, and *Gathering Miwu on the Hillside* highlight the evolving roles of married women under the social gender constructs of the Qin and Han Dynasties. The Qin and Early Han Dynasties represent the theoretical construction period of social gender norms, during which both unearthed and transmitted texts recorded numerous female figures. The Peking University Collection of Qin Slips includes Jiao Nü (Teach Women), which features "The Formula for Virtuous Women" and "The Formula for Non-Virtuous Women," regarded as the earliest type of Nüjie (Lessons for Women). Confucian classics such as *The Book of Rites* (Liji), *The Records of Rites* by Dai the Elder (Dadai Liji), and *The Book of Changes* (Zhouyi) also provided educational guidance for women. The ideas of "divorce due to childlessness" and "taking concubines" originated from the Dadai Liji, Volume on Destiny, which lists "Seven Grounds for Divorce" (fu you qiqu)^[2]. Xia Zengmin argues that Jiao Nü occupies a position between *The Book of Changes* (Yi) and *The Records of Rites* by Dai the Elder (Dadai Liji), reflecting the Qin dynasty's official intervention in the construction of gender order. In other words, societal expectations for female roles had already emerged during the Qin and early Han periods^[3]. This raises the question: does "Qian's"

marital situation align with these expectations?

In the Peking University Collection of Qin Slips, *The Husband Goes to War*, the protagonist "Qian" writes a "lament letter" to her husband, referred to as "Gongzi," accusing him of "unrighteousness" and "lack of affection." She resolutely opposes his association with a widow, declaring: "If I die, then go ahead; if I live, the widow and I cannot coexist"^[4]. In the text, the plant "miwu" serves as an important metaphor, having been imbued with the meaning of seeking offspring as early as *The Lesser Master of Fate* in *The Songs of Chu*^[5]. The absence of children within her marriage creates immense pressure on Qian. By writing the "lament letter," she expresses her inner resentment and courageously negotiates her position, a stance that starkly contrasts with societal expectations of gender roles.

Scholars of literature and history identify the Lesser Master of Fate as a deity responsible for overseeing offspring and the fate of children^[6]. The presence of miwu in rituals dedicated to this deity signifies its symbolic association with fertility. Academic consensus suggests that miwu refers to the young shoots of *Ligusticum chuanxiong* (Szechuan lovage), known for its properties that may support fertility. However, *The Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica* describes miwu as "spicy and warm in flavor, effective against coughing and repelling malevolent forces," without explicitly mentioning any benefits for conception^[7].

The author posits that the attribution of fertility-promoting properties to miwu originates from the "law of similarity" principle in ancient magical practices. As a dicotyledonous umbelliferous plant with numerous small, dense leaves, miwu visually aligns with the imagery of abundance and numerous offspring, thereby symbolizing fertility.



Figure 1 Illustrated Classic of Materia Medica

In *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Western Second Section*, it is recorded: "There is a tree with round leaves and white calyx, red flowers with black veins, and fruits resembling oranges. Consuming it brings blessings for descendants"^[8]. Although the fruit described, similar to the trifoliate orange (*Zhi*), has no confirmed fertility-enhancing effects, its symbolism of reproductive ability reflects principles of ancient magical practices. Similarly, the Han people believed that frequent contact with miwu or placing it in sachets could aid in conception. This explains the presence of miwu in rituals dedicated to the Lesser Master of Fate. As early as the Chu state period, miwu was associated with fertility prayers. In *The Husband Goes to War*, miwu inherits the symbolic meaning from *The Songs of Chu*, and this is further corroborated by the unearthed Peking University Qin Slips.

In the text, the protagonist "Qian," distressed by her inability to bear children, encounters miwu and is deeply affected, reflecting on her husband's potential to abandon her or take a concubine due to her childlessness. "Her heart was troubled." She writes a lament letter proposing methods to conceive and firmly demands her husband sever ties with the widow. Similar metaphors are found in *The Book of Songs: Zhonggu You Cui*, where plants such as "plantain" (*Puyu*) and "cui" (*Artemisia*), symbolize women abandoned due to childlessness. Wen Yiduo pointed out that such plants were attributed special meanings because of their association with fertility and numerous offspring^[9].

"Qian" repeatedly accuses her husband of "lack of affection" (*buai*) and "unrighteousness" (*buren*). The former refers to his indifference, while the latter implies the possibility of abandoning her or taking a concubine due to her inability to bear children. She vehemently opposes this, declaring, "If I live, the widow and I cannot coexist." This resistance sharply contrasts with the societal expectations of gender roles, showcasing the struggle of women in the early Qin and Han periods as they negotiated their positions against societal norms.

2 Early to Mid-Late Western Han: Wang Ji

During the early to mid-late Western Han period, the social gender roles of married women became increasingly restricted. However, instances of autonomous resistance persisted, exemplified by the protagonist "Wang Ji" in the

Peking University Collection of Western Han Bamboo Books. Scholars in literature and history generally regard Wang Ji as a popular fu composition narrating a folk tale^[10].

Literary works often reflect reality, and "Wang Ji" serves as a microcosm of most married women during this period. Under the influence of Dong Zhongshu's teachings, women's roles within the family were further constrained, yet complete submission was not universal. For example, Wang Ji, scorned by her husband and in-laws for her unattractive appearance, protested repeatedly when they attempted to take a concubine. In her admonitions, Wang Ji warned that taking a concubine could lead to "financial ruin," "domestic discord," "troubles caused by the concubine," and "increasing worries for the husband." She directly stated: "If you insist on buying a beautiful concubine, your troubles will only multiply. If you don't plan carefully now, what will you do later^[11]?"

Despite her persistent efforts, her husband and in-laws remained determined to bring a concubine into the household, illustrating the tension between women's resistance and their limited agency within the family. Her in-laws justified their decision by citing Wang Ji's "ugliness." In response, Wang Ji invoked historical anecdotes, such as King Zhou of Shang losing his kingdom due to Daji, and Emperor Shun benefiting from the counsel of his unattractive wife, Mumu, to argue that a beautiful concubine could bring disaster to the family. However, under the constraints of prevailing social gender norms, she was unable to prevent the concubine's entrance.

Wang Ji's defiance of her in-laws and her perceived jealousy led to her rejection by society. Her portrayal aligns with the Book of Rites (Liji)'s guidelines, which allowed for the dismissal of a wife on grounds such as disobedience toward in-laws and jealousy. This portrayal also reflects Confucian ideals of gender roles.

Although Wang Ji was not dismissed for childlessness, scholars suggest she came from a noble family, while her husband's family, the Zhou clan, had declined in status. To preserve the family's political and economic standing, her husband was compelled to take a concubine^[12]. The act of taking a concubine as a means to produce heirs became a social obligation Wang Ji could not resist. After the concubine Yushi entered the household, the text contrasts Wang Ji's "ugliness" with Yushi's "beauty" to critique the former's jealousy and resistance.

On her deathbed, Wang Ji repents: "It is my jealousy that caused my ruin." She mentions "jealousy" four times, acknowledging that her envy toward Yushi led to her severe illness. She even transfers her dowry to the concubine as compensation. The narrative highlights that transferring a wife's property to a concubine required official and maternal family oversight, indicating that concubines normally lacked inheritance rights. Wang Ji's ultimate demise, resulting from her defiance of in-laws and failure to conform to gender norms, contrasts with Yushi's portrayal as an ideal figure who respects in-laws and honors the wife. This dichotomy underscores the author's intent to use literature as a tool for moral instruction, aligning with societal expectations.

3 Mid-Late Western Han to the End of the Eastern Han: Gathering Miwu on the Hillside and The Dismissed Wife's Lament

From the mid-late Western Han to the end of the Eastern Han, married women increasingly adopted a passive stance toward "divorce due to childlessness" and "taking concubines." In *Gathering Miwu on the Hillside*, the protagonist is abandoned by her husband for being childless: "Gathering miwu on the hillside, Meeting my former husband on the way... Though the new wife is praised, she cannot compare to the old^[13]."

In this poem, miwu symbolizes childlessness. According to *Famous Physicians' Records*, miwu refers to the shoots of *Ligusticum chuanxiong* (Szechuan lovage), while *The Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica* attributes it with properties for treating female infertility^[14]. Despite the protagonist's superior weaving skills—"The new wife weaves brocade; the former wife weaves plain silk... The new is not as good as the old"—her husband abandons her on the grounds of childlessness. This illustrates how women's economic contributions were easily overshadowed by Confucian ethical demands during the Qin and Han periods. Influenced by Confucian ideology, "divorce due to childlessness" and "taking concubines" gradually became inescapable norms for married women.

As social gender awareness evolved, the term *zi*, meaning "child," began to take on gendered connotations during the late Eastern Han. Yan Aimin argues that in the Han Dynasty, *zi* referred to both sons and daughters, but by the Wei and Jin periods, it predominantly signified male offspring^[15]. This shift reflects the increasing exclusion of women from the definition of *zi*, which diminished their influence within the family.

An illustrative example is Liu Xun, who divorced his wife, Wang Song, during the late Han Dynasty, citing "childlessness" as the reason. Historical records, however, reveal that Wang Song had already borne him a daughter. This indicates that the Han-era notion of daughters as heirs was being supplanted by a growing societal preference for male descendants.

As recorded in *The Book of the Later Han: Biography of Liu Ping*: "Zhong left behind a posthumous daughter, only a year old. Ping took Zhong's daughter and abandoned his son." This suggests that daughters were once regarded as heirs.

However, Liu Xun's dismissal of his wife, Wang Song, on the grounds of "no sons, only daughters" marked a shift in this perception. In *The Dismissed Wife's Lament* by Cao Pi, it is written: "Indeed, to be dismissed for having no sons aligns with customary rites^[16]." This indicates that the practice of dismissing a wife for childlessness had become widely accepted and institutionalized by society.

In *The Abandoned Wife's Poem* by Cao Zhi, he laments: "I clutch my heart and sigh deeply; Without sons, one must return home. Those with sons endure as long as the moon; Those without sons fade like shooting stars."

The poem contrasts the experiences of having sons versus being childless, portraying the anguish of abandoned women. The pomegranate is used as a metaphor for fertility and numerous descendants, while the moon symbolizes a long-lasting union, and the shooting star represents the fleeting fate of the abandoned wife. Toward the end, the poem mentions the cassia tree, which, though slow to bear fruit, produces high-quality yields. This conveys sympathy for women's innocence in childlessness and encourages patience from husbands. If the poem refers to Wang Song, it poignantly depicts her despair and helplessness at being dismissed, reflecting Cao Zhi's empathy for her plight.

Liang Jian points out that while the poetry and prose of Cao Pi and his contemporaries express sorrow and grievances, they were primarily written "in accordance with the times," ultimately reinforcing the practice of dismissing a wife for being childless^[17].

Yutai Xinyong records: "Wang Song, wife of General Liu Xun, served her family for over twenty years. Later, Liu Xun fell for a woman from the Sima clan of Shanyang and dismissed Wang Song for having no sons. On her way home, she composed two poems." This explicitly indicates that Liu Xun used "childlessness" as a pretext to dismiss his wife. However, *Records of the Three Kingdoms: Book of Wei* states: "Liu Xun of Langya, Governor of Henei, had a daughter nearly twenty years old." This suggests that Wang Song had already borne Liu Xun a daughter, and the claim of "childlessness" was merely an excuse. This reflects the growing preference for male offspring and the further marginalization of women in social gender roles during that period.

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