

BAN ZHAO AND THE QUESTION OF FEMALE PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA

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Abstract

This article begins with an introduction to the general problems of women and philosophy and shows that female philosophical theorists worldwide still stand in the shadow of their male colleagues, regardless of where they live, their theoretical potential and the value of their research. Then, the article focuses upon the situation in China. The author considers and analyses some systemic problems related to the position and significance of women philosophers in the history of Chinese philosophy. The study challenges traditional views of this problem and argues that in this context we have to differentiate between classical discourses and later ideologies that openly promoted the inferior position of women in society. Through an analysis of the works of Ban Zhao (45 – 117 BCE), the first influential female thinker in Chinese intellectual history, the author also aims to expose the contradiction between dominant patriarchal conventions on the one hand and latent, often hidden criticism of gender relations in women's writing in traditional China, on the other.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, female philosophy, Ban Zhao, gender studies

1. General Introduction: Women and Philosophy

The disparity between male and female philosophers is a topic that concerns not only pre-modern, traditionally patriarchal societies. In contemporary Europe, for example, the number of women who work in the field of philosophy is still “alarmingly low”,¹ and the situation is similar on other continents of the “developed world”. The American sociologist Kieran Healy also investigated the ratio of women who received doctorates in different disciplines in the

¹ ANDERL, S. Der Aufschrei der Philosophinnen. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 22. 3. 2013 [online] [cit. 19 November, 2018], p. 1. Available from <<http://blogs.faz.net/planckton/2013/06/22/der-aufschrei-der-philosophinnen-812>>.

United States in 2009, and the results showed that philosophy was the field in which women received the fewest doctorates. It turned out that the percentage of women with doctorates in philosophy is even smaller than the percentage of their colleagues in other subjects traditionally considered as being “male”, such as mathematics, chemistry or astrophysics. This inequality is also reflected in the area of academic employment. Only 21 percent of philosophers in the USA are female, and the same goes for the UK. To put this in context, just under half of all university professors in America are female, and thus they are strongly underrepresented in philosophy.

What are the reasons for the fact that it is obviously harder for women to gain recognition in the field of philosophical research? While there are several answers to this question, they all remain at the level of speculation. One supposition, according to which women think differently than men, as supported by philosophers such as Hegel or Schopenhauer (and which is, by the way, also supported by many feminist theoreticians, albeit on a value-neutral level), cannot be proved empirically. On the other hand, there are a number of well-grounded psychological studies which imply the existence of implicit prejudices and stereotypes, such as, for example, the notion of “subtle incompetence”.² Such ideas are extraordinarily powerful in science and philosophy, and recent studies³ have shown that members of certain social groups in which such prejudices prevail display less efficiency, as their knowledge of these prejudices influences their concrete actions in the sense that they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Perhaps it is not too unrealistic to expect that this sort of uncertainty influences women who work in the field of philosophy as well, as it is run by white, heterosexual and unhandicapped men. The effect of such psychological phenomena is perhaps one of the reasons for the fact that there are many discrepancies between the genders when it comes to the publication of philosophical articles in the most prestigious academic journals. The female philosopher Sally Haslanger (2005) compared the number of female and male authors who have published an article in one of the five most important philosophical journals in 2008. She found that 95.5 percent of articles published in the leading philosophical journal *Mind* were written by male authors. Only in one of the five issues was the number of female authors comparable to the number of women employed in departments and institutes of philosophy. If we set aside the assumption that women are naturally worse at creating good

² BELL, A. E. et al. Interacting with Sexist Men Triggers Social Identity Threat Among Female Engineers. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 96, No. 6, p. 1089.

³ Ibid.

theories, there can remain two possible reasons for such numbers. Women are either publishing fewer articles, or it is due to the reviewers being victims of (unconscious?) gender prejudices, as Haslanger found that the review processes for such papers are far from being completely anonymous.

Haslanger also found that the number of women working in the humanities is continually growing, and that the imbalances between genders in such subjects are already a lot smaller than in the natural sciences, with one single exception: precisely philosophy. The Swiss Association of Women in Philosophy came to the same conclusion with regard to the situation in Switzerland.⁴ Its president, the philosopher Melanie Altanian, also believes that the main reason for this is a widely accepted biologicistic prejudice according to which women are more emotional and men more rational and analytical.

It is thus no wonder that many women in philosophy work in the field of feminist philosophy, which has introduced many innovative approaches, concepts and theories into an academic field that remains dominated by men. Most of these female philosophers bring new feminist insights into the framework of traditional Western philosophical disciplines, including their analytical, continental and pragmatic traditions. These new insights are often radical, as they include many interventions in the fundamentals of philosophical reasoning. By influencing traditional fields of theoretical work, which stretch from metaphysics, ethics, logic and phenomenology to epistemology and ontology, these female philosophers are introducing new concepts, perspectives and dimensions to them. In this way, they are not only changing the sub-disciplines in question, but also widening the horizons of philosophy itself. They touch upon themes which have hitherto belonged to the margins of philosophy, without being treated by anybody. Some examples of such new approaches are linked to the concept of the body, to discrepancies between social classes, to the division of labour, disability, family, reproduction, the self, sexual work, human trafficking and sexuality. They also bring a specific, feminist outlook to the discussion of questions regarding the problems of science, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism.

⁴ ALTANIAN, M. *Die Klassiker sind nunmal alle von Männern geschrieben* [online] [cit. 19 November 2018], p. 2. Available from <<https://www.srf.ch/kultur/gesellschaft-religion/frauen-in-der-philosophie-die-klassiker-sind-nunmal-alle-von-maennern-geschrieben>>.

2. Female Philosophy in China

If we think of all the infamous manifestations of the oppression of women, such as foot-binding or concubinage, one might think that female philosophy would be an impossibility in premodern China. However, the question of the connection between female gender and Chinese philosophy is far more complex.⁵ Let us first take a quick look at the present situation.

In her recent works, the young Chinese female theorist Jia Cuixiang reminds us of the silent, yet deadly serious threats of the dark, hidden guards who keep careful watch at the gates that lead into the opulent palace of philosophical thought, and protect it from women, who are seen as being inherently profane and are therefore strictly forbidden from entering.⁶ Jia continues and warns of the close connection between such points of view and the patriarchal tradition of China. In accordance with tradition, a woman was truly a woman only when she respected womanly virtues and acted according to them. She points out that traditional morals dictated that women should view being uneducated and untalented as strengths and should abide by appropriate principles:

“Only a woman without talent is a virtuous woman”. Hence, women should respect the social regulations that were made for them. They should walk, sit and behave in a proper way: “Do not show your teeth when smiling, when walking your skirt should stay still.” Secondly, these viewpoints are a reflection of the image of a woman created by a man within a patriarchal society. Since the end of matrilineal tribes, there is a dominance of the patrilineal social order, in which men take up the central and primary position. That is why the decision on what a woman should be like is always made by men. Nonetheless, most men are still of the opinion that a woman should be gentle, loving and humble. A lot of women still inhibit their potential and repress their talents. No wonder we became a second-class gender and we still are neither equal nor independent. We are still subjugated by and belong to the first-class gender, men. We are defined by the roles of mothers, daughters and wives. And yet these are roles acquired in societies created by men. This also undoubtedly holds true.

⁵ Even in the earliest Chinese mythology, the universe was created by two deities, namely the male (Fuxi) and the female (Nüwa) ones (see for instance VAMPELJ SUHADOLNIK, N. Transmission of Han Pictorial Motifs into the Western Periphery: Fuxi and Nüwa in the Wei-Jin Mural Tombs in the Hexi Corridor. In *Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 48).

⁶ JIA, Cuixiang 贺翠香. Nü ren yu zhexue 女人与哲学 [Women and Philosophy]. In *Ai sixiang*, 2004, p. 2 [online] [cit. 18 November 2018]. Available from <<http://www.aisixiang.com/data/25834.html>>.

什么“女子无才便是德”，女人要遵守妇道和妇德，要坐有坐样，走有走样，“笑不露齿，行不动裙”，这样才象一个女人。其次，是父权社会中男性对女性的塑造。自母系氏族社会解体以来，人类社会就一直是以男性为中心地位的父亲社会。女人应该怎样，这取决于男性的价值判断。在大多数男人的眼里，女人应该是温柔的、可爱的、娇小的等。女人为了博得男人的欣赏和欢心，也会努力地把自已的天性压抑住，塑造成男性喜欢的样子。所以波伏瓦才会说，女性是第二性的，她从来没有取得过与男性独立、平等的地位，她从来都附属于第一性——男性。女人的母性、女儿性、妻性等都是后天的、被男性社会所塑造出来的。此话有一定的道理。⁷

All of these factors naturally contribute to the fact that only a few women decide to study philosophy. This is because the prevailing opinion in modern society is still that philosophy is not suitable for women.

We often hear people advising women to pursue the study of Chinese literature and culture, foreign languages, marketing or law. These are supposed to be good subjects which are suitable for women, since they correspond to feminine tenderness and vitality. The decision to study philosophy is seen as unwise, or even frightening.

常听人们谈到，作为一个女孩最好去学中文、外语、贸易、法律等专业。专业好又具有女孩子气，似乎这些专业更适合女性温柔、灵活的气质。而学哲学则被看作是一个不明智的，甚至是可怕的选择。⁸

All this sheds a different light on the main topic of this article, which deals with women in Chinese philosophy. Against this background, it becomes clear that female philosophers in China are not only limited by the sexual prejudices of their own, Chinese culture, but also by those prejudices which have wider universal and global dimensions. Despite this, it is mainly the traditional Chinese patriarchy which defines and conditions most of their activities. In the rest of this article, I will therefore first introduce the culturally conditioned features of this specific form of patriarchal order, and explore the role of women in the Chinese philosophical tradition. While the pre-Qin classics (including Confucianism, as the most recent studies and interpretations show) actually

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ Ibid.

supported the ideas of gender equality and promoted equal opportunities for education, many later periods brought restrictions and placed increasingly rigid limitations on women's access to learning.

Quite a few contemporary researchers believe that the long-lasting presumption of the inherent sexism of classical Confucianism was too superficial and at the same time outdated.⁹ The opinion that Western feminist theories are not an appropriate tool to understand the structures of sexual relationships and the value of women in classical Chinese discourse is also widely held.¹⁰ Instead, most theoreticians promote a more culturally sensitive approach, which would connect textual analyses with actual and comprehensive knowledge of the historical and social contexts in which these discourses were situated.

If we follow the assumption of Simone de Beauvoir, according to which a woman is not born one but becomes one, then we first have to understand the symbolic and societal meaning attached to the term "Chinese woman", in the sense of a sexual as well as a cultural being. If we assume that every culture is evolving and that the social construction of gender is both social as well as cultural, then it becomes clear that the collective view of the foreign "Other" through the lens of Western frameworks is not only an inappropriate tool, but also leads to the elimination of the essence of the subject we wish to research. What is even worse is that by accepting this approach, we automatically accept the alleged superiority of Western culture, as it would serve as a kind of umbrella norm under which it is possible to conceptually subsume all other cultures regardless of their local and empirical particularities.¹¹

In the Confucian Analects, for example, there are no sexist statements. The only quote which could be interpreted as an expression of belittling women and is therefore cited wherever there is a need to "prove" the patriarchal nature of original Confucianism, reads as follows:

The Master said: "Girls and common people are the most difficult to get along with. If you are too familiar with them, they lose their humility. But if you maintain a distance from them, they become offended."

子曰：「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。」¹²

⁹ e. g. PANG-WHITE, A. A. Chinese Philosophy and Woman: Is Reconciliation Possible? In *American Philosophical Association Newsletter*, 2009, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰ KIM, S. The Way to Become a female Sage: Yunjidang's Confucian Feminism. In *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2014, Vol. 75, No. 3, pp. 396–397.

¹¹ ROSENLEE, L. L. *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*, p. 3.

¹² *Lunyu* 論語 [The Analects], Yang Huo, p. 25.

Recent etymological and hermeneutical research shows that this sentence is actually not about women or girls, and not about uneducated “common people” or persons with a low level of moral development,¹³ but more likely about male and female servants, about farmhands and maids.¹⁴ Such an interpretation implies that this statement does not have any sexist and patriarchal connotations.

Most scholars, however, agree that there was less sexual equality in the later periods, the fault of which they attribute to Confucianism and Confucian ethics. Although this assumption is true to some degree, it is misleading. We must not forget the many differences between Confucianism as a moral philosophy and Confucianism as mainstream normative ethics. This differentiation was already established in the Han Dynasty (206 – 220 BCE), when state ideologists under the leadership of Dong Zhongshu formulated a new doctrine in which they took the teachings of original Confucianism, which were rather progressive for their time, and merged them with the despotic ideology of Legalism. In this way, the originally egalitarian Confucian teachings became a dogmatic Confucian state doctrine, and the philosophical questions of this once proto-democratic discourse were replaced by rigid state formed dogmas, which emphasized hierarchical differences between people and increased the authority of those in power. After the blossoming of so-called Neo-Confucianism during the Song (960 – 1279) and Ming (1368 – 1644) dynasties, the legitimisation of oppression – and with it, of course, the increasingly difficult position of women in Chinese society – were almost continuously strengthened.

Larger mass rebellions of women and their progressive male colleagues against such gender inequality and patriarchal Confucian ethics arose only much later, at the dawn of the modern age, especially during the modifications of traditional Chinese culture that manifested themselves most clearly during the long-lasting influence of the so-called May 4th Movement.

¹³ In the Confucian *Analects*, the term *xiao ren* 小人 is most commonly used as a binary opposition to the notion *junzi* 君子. While the latter is positive and denotes a morally perfect and accomplished person, the former is negative and stands in opposition with such characteristics; it rather characterises an uneducated and primitive human being who acts only in accordance with his/her own interests. However, a more detailed philological study (see for instance ROSENLEE, L. L. *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* and PANG-WHITE, A. A. Chinese Philosophy and Woman: Is Reconciliation Possible? In *American Philosophical Association Newsletter*) shows, that in this context, the term *xiao ren* is being applied in the sense of a male servant.

¹⁴ e. g. KINNEY, A. B. Women in the Analects. In GOLDIN, P. (ed.). *A Concise Companion to Confucius*, pp. 149–150.

But before taking a closer look at what role women's philosophy played in this context, we need to return to the Chinese tradition and examine more carefully some changes of paradigms that occurred in Chinese society during different periods of the intellectual history of this ancient "Middle Kingdom". In order to shed some light on these changes, we will introduce and analyse critically the changing interpretations of the well known binary category of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, which is commonly associated with male and female symbols.

3. The Complementarity of Yin Yang 陰陽

Classical and traditional Chinese philosophies are holistic, which does not mean that their discourses are ones in which all the factors would be connected in a fashion that would not permit any analytical separation between them, thereby also preventing logical processing of the content of these discourses.

On the contrary: referential frames, specifically those of Chinese philosophy, are based on the paradigms of binary categories. This means that its methodology works in coherence with binary orders which manifest themselves in a few conceptual prototypes, with the help of which it is possible to analytically process foundational attributes, relations, functions and the communicativeness of the main notions and concepts which characterize its basic referential frames.

In this way, every subject and every occurrence can be analysed from the perspective of its shape, content or property through the lens of two contradictory ideas or poles. The most common pair of such mutually oppositional notions, which has in the last few decades – in a very simplified form – become well known outside of China as well, is of course *Yinyang*. *Yin* and *Yang* represent the symbols of femininity and masculinity. However, this is only one of the many connotations which can be described by this category. Originally *Yin* meant shadowy or dim, while *Yang* represented the sunny or bright side of the mountain. In a metaphorical way, the sun and the shadow are of course symbols of clarity and mystery, the manifest and the latent.

These basic attributes of *Yin* and *Yang* are closely connected to a specifically Chinese logic as well as to the Chinese theory of knowledge. The history of Chinese dialectical thought has its origin precisely in the concept of *Yinyang*. This is the way Liu Changlin 劉常林 describes the close connection between the principle of complementarity and Chinese epistemology:

Yin and *Yang* are mutually a part of each other. I am part of you, you are part of me. That is why the complementary attribute of *Yinyang* is

connected to the complimentary interaction of both poles. Because of this, both poles transfer their information to their opposite, while at the same time storing the information received. Making discoveries through such a complementary (correlative) relationship between *Yin* and *Yang* is the essence of the Chinese theory of knowledge.

陰陽之間的相互反映, 相互包涵。你中有我, 我中有你。故有陰可以見陽, 故有陽可以見陰。陰陽返照的特性來源于陰陽的相互作用。由于相互作用各自把自己的信息傳給對方, 同時又成為對方信息的接受者和貯存者。通過陰陽返照關 來認識事物, 才是充分顯示中國特色的認識論。¹⁵

The list of binary categories similar to *Yinyang* is very long. For example, it includes the conceptual pair *benmo* 本末 (literally meaning root and branch), which deals with the relationship between cause and effect or between general and particular, and even between deduction and induction. Another pair is *tiyong* 體用 (literally meaning body and usage), with the help of which we can study the relationships between substance and function, between the fundamental and coincidental or between content and application.

Dialectic interaction is typical of all counterpoles that form binary categories. However, the dialectical process which derives from these categories is not based on the static dualistic Cartesian model, which has dominated the history of modern and contemporary Euro-American philosophy, but is defined by the principle of mutual complementarity. The distinctiveness of this principle is particularly evident if we compare it to Hegel's dialectics.

In this model, a thesis is negated by antithesis. The thesis and antithesis are mutually exclusive. This means the counterpoles within the dualistic model are not only in mutual opposition but also in mutual contradiction. The tension created in this contradiction triggers a sublation or, to use the German term, *Aufhebung*, which makes the synthesis of the thesis and antithesis possible. Thus the sublation works in all three conceptual connotations encompassed in *Aufhebung*, namely elimination, preservation, and ascent. This means that both the thesis and antithesis become eliminated in synthesis, while at the same time preserving certain positive elements of both counterpoles.

Concurrently the synthesis also represents some new, qualitatively different phase of the dialectic process. In the system of Chinese binary dialectics, the two counterpoles are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary of each other and also co-dependent. Such a model of correlatively complementary

¹⁵ LIU, Changlin 劉常林. *Zhongguo xitong siwei* 中國系統思維 [The System of Chinese Thought], p. 214.

dialectics does not result in synthesis, which would be separated from the continued interaction of both counterpoles, but is rather maintained in the very process of the interaction.

The fundamental difference between the Cartesian and the correlatively-complementary system is thus in the fact that opposition is mutually complementary within the latter, while in the first model opposition also means contradiction.

It is no coincidence that the Creator in the Christian tradition has to be male. The categories of holy and profane, the basic categories of the formal logic of the type “A or not A”, form an absolute contradiction, which is not a contradiction of reciprocity, but is hierarchically structured. In the contradictory dichotomy “of A or not A” only A has a positive reality, while the “not A” appears only as a negation or the absence of “A”.

This structure can also be applied to society’s perception of gender: in the patriarchal Christian tradition, the woman appears as a non-man, as a negation or deformation of a man. The different qualities become unrecognizable in the zone of the negative. John Dewey depicted this in the following way:

If we take for example, “virtue” as A, then “not A” is not only “sin” but also triangles, horse racing, symphonies and the equinox.¹⁶

The realm of the negative, meaning the category of “not A”, is being deprived of any actual qualification in the frame of the comprehension of reality: with this, it becomes an element of unreasonableness, nonsense, inattentiveness, impurity and idleness, which simultaneously means poverty. The next characteristic which is common to all dichotomic differentiations is, therefore, the fear of Chaos (impurity), inside which a person could find themselves if they did not insist on the dismissal of the third relationship of both dichotomic categories, which also contradicts absoluteness. The negation of A (regarding gender this is, of course, the female) is infinite and intangible. Just the norm alone, meaning the category of positive reality, category A (which can be in this respect equated with the male gender) carries within itself a constructive potential, which delimits the entire colourful spectre of the “wilderness” (nothingness) and converts it to Order; it changes Chaos to a well-ordered life, which is worthy of a higher being, a being which is created in His image, a human being, who is a man, gifted with reason. Hence, the act of Christian genesis reminds us of an act of abstract construction, rather than an act of wholesome and also physical creativity. The Christian God splits the human (and even His own) reason from nature. So it comes as no coincidence

¹⁶ DEWEY, J. *Logic – The Theory of Inquiry*, p. 192.

that in the Christian tradition, which created the only Creator, who commands humans to “subdue nature”, the symbolic meaning of the woman is connected to nature, while that of the man is connected to culture.

Much like religion, reason provides security. This kind of security is based on fear, on the fatality of uncontrollable conditions of human existence; the exclusion of creation, change, movement, indefinable waves of happiness and sorrow, delight and suffering, birth, old age, and death – the exclusion of diversity, differentiations and also the exclusion of the indefinites of all existing genders as humanely feminine and masculine.

It is good firstly to recall the fact that surely not all dichotomic differentiations are structured by the principle of “either A or not A”. The dichotomy A and B alone, for example, also represents an opposition, although this in itself does not represent a logical contradiction; thus, the existence of A does not exclude the existence of B, and vice versa. Hence, A and B are in a certain sense connected, without any mutual distinction between them. They are mutually nullified, since both concepts have a positive reality. The dichotomy of A and B is necessarily limited, because it does not contain the concepts of C, D, E, etc., although it also does not exclude the possibility of their existence.

We will attempt to illustrate the basics of the correlative thought of such dialectics through the example of the most common symbol of gender: the concept of *Yin Yang*, which also represents the dichotomic base of a specifically Chinese dialectical method within the Chinese tradition.

The internal dynamics of this dialectic is not based on the principle of mutual exclusion, hostility, and competition, but rather on the principle of complementarity. In contrast to the Hegelian dialectic, this concept consists of two categories, constituting the symbols of opposition, which, despite the imagery in which they were placed (here, male and female correspond to light and darkness, creation and transience, passivity and action), possess the same opposing and mutually completing meaning. According to Chinese thought, this symbolic pair is intertwined in everything in nature; this conception forms the vast palette of all the processes of life. Its complexity, diversity and the multiple layers of which it consists are not rationally distinguishable; they do not limit themselves with any demand to reach the Absolute. Thus, in Chinese understanding the complementary existence (or presence) of two (or more) elements is a form of all-embracing change, in which *Yin* and *Yang* constantly pass through each other and change into one another. The meaning of *Yin* is *Yang*, and inversely, the meaning of *Yang* is *Yin*. Such concepts do not allow for any evaluation in accordance with the criteria of the traditional European discourses, and it is precisely this which has led to the difficulties and misunderstandings with regard to European (Western) comprehension of traditional Chinese dialectics and logic.

We also have to warn that this once distinctively complementary cyclical structure of gender concepts, the beginnings of which can be traced to the age of the earliest ancient Chinese writings, has been endlessly “reinterpreted” and “commented on”, in accordance with the Confucian doctrines of society and state, which have with time become increasingly patriarchal. This patriarchal reevaluation of the *Yin Yang* concept reached its peak during the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279), with the establishment of a conservative Neo-Confucian ideology, the consequences of which were also seen in the substantial worsening of the position of Chinese women. This patriarchal cultural imperialism was not only evident in the distorted reevaluation of the *Yin Yang* concept, but also in all forms of writing which were connected to or spoke of a more equal position for women in the earlier periods of civilizational development.

The patriarchy has truly masterfully obscured and destroyed most of the sources which pointed to the existence of the great Goddess; nowhere was this done with more precision and perfection than in China. The Confucian bureaucrats spent entire centuries conducting strict editorial control over all Chinese literary classics, commenting on them according to their world view. They destroyed most ancient myths and legends. Only a few unrelated fragments from different historical periods managed to survive this censorship, which stemmed from a mixture of contempt and the feeling of being threatened. For this reason, the evidence for the existence of pre-patriarchal (or non-patriarchal) consciousness remains weak and incomplete.¹⁷

It is only possible to find the existence of the *Yin Yang* theory in reliable sources after the beginning of the 12th century BC. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it did not exist much earlier. Surviving sources from the oldest period of Chinese civilization are so rare that “not mentioning an institution cannot lead one to the conclusion that it did not exist”.¹⁸

However, many sinologists, as well as most Chinese experts, believe that the terms *Yin* and *Yang* were created later, in the period during the beginning of the Zhou 周 Dynasty (11th century BCE) and in the time of Laozi 老子 (ca. 6th to 5th century BCE).¹⁹ Nevertheless, the idea of polarities, which originated from the separation of heaven and earth (not in a metaphysical but a purely material

¹⁷ COLEGRAVE, S. *Yin und Yang*, p. 38.

¹⁸ FORKE, A. *Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie (I.)*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Laozi (personal name: Li Er) is not a historical person, but rather a semi legendary figure. Thus, the dating of his life is questionable. However, he is usually portrayed as a 6th century BCE contemporary of Confucius, even though some modern historians consider him to have lived later, i.e. during the 4th century BCE.

sense), is much older. This idea was concretely expressed in eight trigrams of the oldest classic of Chinese philosophy, i.e. *The Book of Changes* [*Yi jing*].

All existence is born from *Yin* and *Yang*, for the tension between them is the main driving force of all life. Later philosophical commentaries on *The Book of Changes*, which can be found in the work *Yi zhuan*, often concretely describe this notion.

Hard and soft (lines) were manipulated together (to form the eight trigrams), and those eight trigrams were added, each to itself and to all the others, (to form the sixty-four hexagrams). Hence, there were the exciting forces of thunder and lightning; the fertilizing influences of wind and rain; and the revolutions of the sun and moon, which give rise to cold and warmth. The attributes expressed by *Qian* constitute the male; those expressed by *Kun* constitute the female. *Qian* (or Heaven) directs the great beginnings of things; *Kun* (or Earth) completes them. It is by the ease by which it proceeds that *Qian* directs (as it does), and by its unhesitating response that *Kun* exhibits such ability.²⁰

剛柔相摩，八卦相盪。鼓之以雷霆，潤之以風雨，日月運行，一寒一暑，乾道成男，坤道成女。乾知大始，坤作成物。乾以易知，坤以簡能。²¹

Thus, the contrast of *Yin* and *Yang* means the beginning (meaning) of all changes and the core of any creativity and all forms of life. The same work states that the Way (*Dao*) is “the consecutive change of the *Yin* and the *Yang*”.²² It is already emphasized in *The Book of Changes* that both genders are required when it comes to creating life. The man and the woman should create the essence and the purpose of the living, respectively, which is being born in constant change; this cooperation can be seen in the combinations of heaven (*Qian*) and earth (*Kun*), which represent the foundation of this proto-philosophical classic.

Yin and *Yang*, the female and male principles, represent a driving force, which gives birth to all that exists through the process of constant change. Both participate equally in this process. There is no mention of a male creator who would take the decisive initiative when giving birth to life. On the other hand, the female *Yin* principle never plays a defining role as the creator or Great Mother of life. However, the Way or ancient force, *Dao*, through which *Yin* and

²⁰ *Qian* and *Kun* are the first and last trigrams in the basic scheme of eight trigrams. The first represents heaven, the last represents earth. Both trigrams symbolize the pure *Yin* and *Yang*, respectively.

²¹ *Zhou yi* 周易 [The Book of Changes of the Zhou Dynasty], Xi ci I: 1.

²² *Ibid.*

Yang create all that exists, is in most cases strictly of female gender in Laozi's classic *Daode jing* [*The Book of the Way and Virtue*].

Dao is frequently mentioned as a mother, as the birth-giving and nurturing parent of all living things. *Laozi* describes it in the first chapter as "the mother of ten thousand beings"... In chapters 25 and 52 the description of *Dao* uses words such as "pre-creation" or "mother of the world".²³

Despite the fact that *Dao* in pre-Confucian and Daoist classics represents the primary force, the Way, which is established by and through Motherhood, through its female creative power, it cannot be equated with a concrete female being (*Yin*), which exists in opposition to a male being (*Yang*).²⁴ Even in the Daoist classics, *Dao* remains an abstract energy, the femininity of which originates from the fact that the materialization of actual life is best observed and described through the act of a female giving birth. The same amount of participation is required from both female and male principles when it comes to the act of creation, though. The male (*Yang*) and female (*Yin*) principle participate complementarily and to the same degree. This is evident in the following commentaries on the *Classic*:

The *Yin* and the *Yang* are the way (*Dao*) of heaven and of earth, creators of all living things, parents of all change, the root of all births and deaths, the home of the soul and spirit.

陰陽者，天地之道也，萬物之綱紀，變化之父母，生殺之本始，神明之府也。²⁵

Hence, in Chinese tradition, both sides of this dichotomic polarity have a positive existence. The interesting fact here is that most of the famous classical Western sinologists – probably unknowingly – brought a hierarchical relationship to this egalitarian relation of joint creativity, the kind of hierarchical relationship which is common to the traditional European understanding of the Genesis story. Let us take a look at some of such quite doubtful interpretations. For example, Confucius' student Zengzi 曾子 wrote:

²³ KALTENMARK, M. *Laozi und der Taoismus*, 69f.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁵ LIU Changlin 劉常林. *Zhongguo xitong siwei* 中國系統思維 [The System of Chinese Thought], p. 285.

“That, which radiates vital potential from itself, performs. That, which encapsulates it, shapes. So, *Yang* performs and *Yin* shapes”.²⁶

The character *shi* 施, translated here by the word “perform”, has more meanings. Alongside “perform”, it can also mean “to dedicate”, “to enforce” or “to use”. For whatever reason, the European scholar Alfred Forke (1867 – 1944) chose to translate it using the words “to produce, to create”.

The character *hua* 化, which was translated using the term “to shape”, could also be translated as: “to change”, “to simplify”, “to make” or “being made”. Forke translated it using the word “re-shape”, which is then in this particular context – particularly with his interpretation – understood as “giving shape (to something which was already created)”. Thus, his translation of the given quotation (which was also adopted by most of the other leading Western sinologists) is “*Yang* creates and *Yin* re-shapes”.²⁷

At some point, *Yang* became the male principle and the creator in orthodox Confucian works as well as classical Western sinological sources, while the *Yin* was only allowed to “re-shape” the substance produced by *Yang*.²⁸ Hence, most translations include the classic European differentiation between the (superior male) substance and (inferior female) outer shape, which did not exist in ancient Chinese tradition. Even Chinese Confucian philosophers have – especially after the establishment of Neo-Confucianism – tried to interpret the originally egalitarian and non-hierarchical relation of the *Yin* and the *Yang* similarly, as if this relationship would always be described as the dominance (of the male principle) and subordination (of the female principle). For example, let us take a look at Laozi’s quote: “All which exists, carries *Yin* and encapsulates *Yang*”.²⁹

The Chinese Confucian philosopher and historian Hsie Wu-Liang commented upon this quote in the second part of his *History of Chinese Philosophy*: “All that exists is from *Yin* and *Yang*. Because the *Yin* constitutes the body and the *Yang* forms the spirit, it is written that all that is living carries *Yin* within itself and encapsulates *Yang*”.³⁰

Although both characters translated here as “carrying” and “encapsulating” have multiple other meanings, especially in classical Chinese, it is not likely that they were originally meant in the contextual sense ascribed to them by Hsie, because such a separation of matter and spirit would be completely alien

²⁶ 吐氣者施而含氣者化。是以陽施而隱化。 *Da dai Li ji* 大戴禮記 [The Great Foundation of the Book of Rites], Zengzi tianyuan: 2

²⁷ FORKE, A. *Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie* (I.), p. 151.

²⁸ See *ibid.*

²⁹ 萬物負隱而抱陽。 LAOZI 老子. *Daode jing* 道德經 [The Book of the Way and its Virtue], p. 42.

³⁰ cp. FORKE, A. *Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie* (I.), p. 267.

to classical Daoist contexts. Moreover, there is little chance that Laozi's work would hand such a subordinate role to the female principle. As we may observe in the remainder of this book, it includes many passages which show respect for and admiration of the female principle as the mother of all that exists.

If it were possible to find any kind of hierarchy of gender evaluation in the *Laozi* – the search for which is, however, quite fruitless – it would probably be dominated by the female principle.

In any case, the complementarity and “lack” of any unequal hierarchy represent a thread which can be found in all traditional Daoist classics. European sinologists were most baffled by the principle which states that the meaning of *Yin* is *Yang*, and vice-versa. They mostly could not understand this because such a dichotomist opposition (which *Yin* and *Yang* undoubtedly form) is completely impossible within the framework of the simplest principles of European logic. Among other things, Zhuangzi states:

In perfect Yin, all is cold and severe; in perfect Yang, all is turbulent and agitated. The coldness and severity come forth from Heaven; the turbulence and agitation comes from Earth. An interaction between the two ensues harmony, and all things are being produced. The two states communicating together, a harmony ensued and things were produced.

至陰肅肅，至陽赫赫；肅肅出乎天，赫赫發乎地；兩者交通成和而物生焉。³¹

Such a quote must have caused serious debate within western sinological circles, as anyone who thinks they are familiar with the attributes of *Yin* and *Yang* is convinced that the *Yin* equals earth and the *Yang* heaven. Forke writes the following in this context:

It is very odd that the *Yin* should come from the heaven and the *Yang* from the earth since *Yin* belongs to the earth and *Yang* belongs to the heaven. Liu Shui's explanation that earthly fluids evaporate upwards, while the heavenly fall downwards does not fit the presented context. Perhaps Willhelm, who warns of the fact that in their origins both fluids contain each other and are created from one another, is right.³²

This principle of mutual complementarity is expressed repeatedly in the classics themselves, as well as in the numerous commentaries, which these more than solidly educated Western experts undoubtedly know of. Hence, we

³¹ *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Wai pian, Tianzi fang, p. 4.

³² FORKE, A. *Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie (I)*, p. 318.

often read in the oldest sources: “The centre of *Yin* is *Yang*, the centre of *Yang* is *Yin*”.³³

In the light of this understanding, we might find the problem of the connection of the earth and heaven with the *Yin* and *Yang* less intriguing than the question of why it still comes up in such debates in sinology after several hundred years of its development as an academic discipline.

This problem can be exemplified by the controversial role and the many different interpretations of the female historian Ban Zhao, who lived and worked in the Han dynasty period.

3. Ban Zhao (45 – 117) and the Changing Interpretations of Her Work

Ban Zhao was primarily an historian, who completed a large part of the official *History of the Western Han Dynasty* [*Han Shu*],³⁴ which was started by her brother Ban Gu (32 – 92). Ban Zhao finished the missing parts of the book, that is, mainly the last eight chapters; she also included an extensive genealogy of the imperial mother, and a lot of additional information which had hitherto not been preserved or recorded. Later she also wrote the “Discussion on Astronomy [Tianwen zhi]” together with Ma Xu, who was a student of her father’s. The inclusion of this work marked the completion of the *History of the Western Han Dynasty*, one of the most important works of traditional Chinese historiography.

She was also an excellent mathematician, astronomer, poet, rhetorician, essayist and writer. Sadly, most of her work has not survived. Alongside all of this, Ban Zhao also engaged in ethics, since she is most renowned as the author of the most famous Confucian book for women, namely *Lessons for Women* [*Nü jie*].³⁵

Ban Zhao was born to an upper-class family in Anling, next to the town of Xianyang in today’s Shaanxi Province as the daughter of the famous writer Ban Biao and the sister of the historian Ban Gu. She was the grandniece of the important female intellectual and poet Ban Jieyu (ca. 48 – ca. 6 BCE). Ban Zhao was a quick learner and became a real bookworm in her early youth. She married when she was fourteen, but her husband died relatively early. After his death, she did not remarry, but instead dedicated her life to reading, writing and art.

³³ 陽中有陰，陰中有陽。Wenzi 文子, Wei ming, p. 21.

³⁴ The official name of this work is *Han shu*, but sometimes it is also referred to as *Qian Han Shu* [The History of the Former Han Dynasty].

³⁵ Later on, this work was included in the so-called *Four Books for Women* [*Nü si shu*]. Therefore *Lessons* had a wide circulation in the late Ming and Qing dynasties.

Her *Lessons for Women* is a booklet that included regulations of Confucian ethics and generally advised women to be humble and respectful in order to contribute to the preservation of harmony in their families. She proceeded from essentialist gender definitions such as the following one:

From their birth on, men are like wolves, always afraid of being too lame.
From their birth on, women are like mice, always afraid of tigers.
生男如狼，犹恐其尪；生女如鼠，犹恐其虎！³⁶

On the other hand, she also repeatedly stressed that women should be well educated, even if this was most often interpreted as a patriarchal virtue. Numerous later interpreters believed that Ban Zhao wanted women to study chiefly for the purpose of serving men. She supported the notion of a woman who is attentive to the point of sacrificing her own position. The work was first meant for women of her own Zhao clan, but later it quickly began to circulate at court, where it soon became one of the most popular and well known books for women. Its popularity continued over many centuries; it was used as a kind of guidebook that was supposed to contain the behavioural norms and appropriate spiritual orientation of women.

In the imperial library Ban Zhao taught Empress Deng Sui and several courtiers, and gained a considerable amount of political influence by doing so. The Empress and concubines called her Superior, and even rewarded her with many fine-sounding titles. The Empress often consulted Ban Zhao on matters of state after she became regent for the newly born Emperor Shang of the Han dynasty. As a token of gratitude, the Empress employed both of her sons as state officials. Ban Zhao was also the court librarian, the chief editor of several works that were published at court, and trained experts in other fields of intellectual work. In this capacity, she also organized and was vital in spreading Lu Xiang's renowned *Biographies of Famous Women*. She probably also watched over the rewriting of manuscripts from bamboo slips to paper, which was invented at the time.

Her *Lessons for Women* are collected in their entirety as part of the *History of the Western Han Dynasty [Han Shu]*. Ban Zhao is described as an “exceptionally well educated and highly talented” person in the preface to this work.³⁷ In the central chapter of this work, “Four Virtues [Si de]”, a virtuous woman is defined above all as one who strictly obeys the rituals that are

³⁶ BAN, Zhao 班昭. Nü jie 女誡 [Lessons for Women]: III. In *Meiri toutiao* 每日頭條 [online] [cit. 10 May 2020]. Available from <<https://kknews.cc/history/pqj9a48.html>>.

³⁷ ROSENLEE, Li-Hsiang L. *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*, p. 103.

ascribed to her gender and remains within the boundaries of the “inner” (*nei*) sphere in both her actions and her general way of life, meaning she should live her life within the four walls of the family home. This life, of course, demanded the knowledge of different household skills and was strictly separated from the “external” (*wai*) sphere. The latter, which remained reserved for the male gender, included trade, politics and other public activities. It was only much later, in the premodern Ming and Qing dynasties, that a more progressive reading of Ban Zhao’s *Lessons* became prevalent among educated women.

These educated women openly, loudly and clearly opposed the then popular slogan which declared that virtuous women are those who have no talent.³⁸ With the help of excerpts taken from Ban Zhao’s work, they aimed to prove that being talented was actually an important prerequisite for women to even comprehend the meaning, significance and the mysterious structure of rituals:

But if we only educate men and not women, we will only hide and cover up the many differences in rituality, prescribed to each of them!
但教男而不教女，不亦蔽於彼此之數乎！³⁹

Even though – as already mentioned – many later interpreters believed that Ban Zhao’s advocating female education was written with the sole purpose of serving men, such passages could also be interpreted in the sense of advocating gender equality in spite of the different social roles prescribed to men and women respectively. According to Ban Zhao, all girls should study at least from the age of eight until the age of fifteen.⁴⁰

Later female intellectuals also applied Ban Zhao’s concept of “female speech” (*Fu yan*), which for centuries was understood only as a terminological guide for the speech of women, to women’s literature, and with that they gained access to the external sphere.

Numerous scholars also interpret Ban Zhao’s conservatism as an attitude which resulted from her high political position. Being a woman, she was a priori in danger. Her close relation with the Empress was of a very fragile nature, because the political influence of the two women could easily have been brought to an end on the pretext that women were not allowed to occupy such important positions in the “external” sphere. Her public acknowledgment of the allegedly inferior or inherently subordinated position of women would –

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁹ BAN, Zhao 班昭. Nü jie 女誡 [Lessons for Women]: II. In *Meiri toutiao* 每日頭條 [online] [cit. 10 May 2020]. Available from <<https://kknews.cc/history/pqj9a48.html>>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

according to such interpretations – function as an expression of loyalty towards the patriarchal state, in which Ban Zhao occupied one of the highest positions.

However, *Lessons for Women* was certainly the first work in Chinese history which explicitly advocated the literacy and education of women.⁴¹ If we evaluate this fact by considering the social and ideological context in which the book was written, it quickly becomes clear that it included very progressive, and perhaps even radical and revolutionary ideas, since one of the main Confucian classics, the *Book of Rituals* [*Li ji*], openly states that only male children should be educated.

It is precisely the radicalism of her argument, which advocates women's literacy, that is something fundamentally different from the otherwise conservative *Lessons*. This inconsistency has always caused problems for intellectuals and researchers of the Chinese past seeking to construct a coherent interpretation of the intentions that actually led Ban Zhao to write this guidebook.⁴²

4. Conclusion

In this light, it becomes clear that Ban Zhao's fight for the education of women had a large influence on later generations in China. In the framework of Confucianism her work is also important, because it helped to eliminate the discriminative prejudice of the contradiction between talent and female virtue, qualities which were defined in the *Lessons* as being mutually complementary and positive attributes of morally irreproachable and successful women. All this points to the fact that the story of Chinese female philosophers is not entirely black and white. Far from being silent, Chinese female philosophers have often engaged in the discipline throughout history. This article has highlighted the rich complexity of the relationship between women and philosophy in Chinese intellectual history. It has shown that the predicaments and problems that prevented women in traditional China from pursuing a creative occupation in philosophy, and which have greatly increased the difficulty of any attempt to research or write philosophy, certainly do not correlate one-dimensionally with the pronounced patriarchal character of classical Chinese philosophy. Rather, they are to be seen as products of gender-specific ideologies within a social tradition that has misused (and still misuses) them for the purpose of maintaining and strengthening patriarchal social structures.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Acknowledgement: The research for this paper was carried out during the author's visit at the Institute for International Communication of Chinese Studies at the Beijing Normal University. The author would like to express her gratitude to this institution for its support of her work. The author also acknowledges the support of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) in the framework of the research core funding Asian Languages and Cultures (P6-0243) and in the scope of the research project N6-0161 Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Europe and China.

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