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Introduction to World History

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Home and Homer: Gender Hierarchies in *The Iliad* and Confucianism

Though separated by many miles and decades, the Homeric tradition – as laid out in *The Iliad* – and Confucius' teachings had a great deal in common. The organizing commonality, however, was each text's preoccupation with the hierarchies that regulated the countless groups, identities, and classes in Chinese and Greek culture. Both Homer and Confucius believed fervently in the necessity of these hierarchical constructs to maintain order – perhaps because both of their thought systems were developed during periods of great social unrest. Yet, out of all of the structures highlighted by Confucius and Homer, one stood out as particularly foundational: the role of women. Gender hierarchies in Homeric and Confucianist thought systems were multifaceted, emphasizing female objectification, subservience, and function in the home or as war-booty. In turn, this basic hierarchy was reinforced in a variety of intriguing ways, all with the purpose of preventing women from disrupting social harmony and the preservation of social structure.

When explicating what attributes were ideal in women, each thought system considered several to be valuable. At the most basic level, women were positioned below men in the social hierarchy, allowing for a greater range of control over female combat-prizes and wives. Throughout the course of *The Iliad*, men struggled furiously in combat to conquer their enemies, winning glory, divine favor, and – significantly – war-booty. Of these prizes, women were a common reward. Most obvious was the Greek army's seizure of Chryseis and Briseis at the

beginning of Homer's epic, both girls ripped from their father and given – as if they were chattel – to Agamemnon and Achilles respectively (Book 1). The poet himself reinforced the women's objectification, almost exclusively referring to Briseis and Chryseis as “prizes” to be “kept” (Book 1) Agamemnon's proposed compensation to Achilles for his theft of Briseis lends itself further to this depersonalization, as the Greek king offers his finest warrior “the twenty loveliest [Trojan] women after...Helen” as well as seven others “skilled in fine needle-craft” (Book 9). These 27 women offered by Agamemnon were intended to compensate Achilles for Briseis – essentially reducing them to a means to an end. They were not inherently valuable in themselves, instead only valuable as items or a sort of human currency proffered up by the Greek king.

But, women won in war were not the only type represented in Homeric thought. *The Iliad* suggested a different dynamic was also prevalent in Homer's ideal Greece via the “Catalogue of Ships,” which described each constituent faction that made up the greater Greek confederacy. It was not that women were mostly absent from Homer's description – they are mentioned only in association with the exclusively male leader of each faction – it is that when mentioned, they were linked solely to childbirth or the care of children (Book 2). Maiden Astyoche is mother to the Aspledonians – Ascalaphus and Ialmenus (Book 2). Astyocheia, wife of Heracles, mother of Rhodian Tlepolemus (Book 2). Alcestis, “loveliest of women,” and mother of Eumelus (Book 2). All of these women were mentioned but briefly by Homer, yet they sent an indelible message: under Homer's system of thought, Greek women were linked to childbearing and rearing (Book 2). In contrast to the domainless women bandied about in the Greek camp, domestic women also appeared to control the home in Homer's idealization of society, and possessed a defined sphere of influence. After all, whilst the Trojan men stream out onto the battlefield to defend their city,

the women are the ones who stay behind, alone in their halls and temples; responsible for maintaining a city under siege.

Confucianism certainly emphasized female objectification to a lesser extent than Homer's thought system – it does not seem that Confucianists were particularly invested in winning women through combat – but the cardinal principal of feminine subservience still constituted the backbone of the thought system's attitude towards women. For example, in Confucius' *The Analects*, the author stipulates that “The lady calls herself ‘your humble servant’” (Confucius, *The Analects*, 16:14) when speaking to her husband. Evidently, while Confucianism did not implicitly define women as objects to be bartered and traded – as the Greeks did with captured females – it still placed them underneath male authority. The most intriguing part of this quote, though, was its focus on the family unit, as mirrored in *The Iliad*. Much like in Homer's Greece, the woman was a supplicant because she was part of her husband's family, a sentiment made even more explicit in Zhao Pan Chao's *Lessons For A Woman*. Here, Pan Chao enumerated her service to her husband's clan – services that included mastery of “the dustpan and the broom” as well as the teaching and training of her children (Pan Chao, *Lessons for a Woman*, Introduction). Not only did Pan Chao's text clarify a woman's place below men in the hierarchy, it also detailed the need for her to take up a role in the home.

But not all insights into the Homeric and Confucianist gender hierarchies were to be found in what traits both thinkers explicitly indicated to be valuable in a woman. In fact, it was equally enlightening to observe instances where Confucianists and Homer frame women as possessing undesirable characteristics. For instance, consider Andromache's pleas to Hector, wherein she begged him not to enter combat, wailing: “Husband, this courage of yours dooms you. You show no pity for your little son or wretched wife, whom you'll soon make a widow.”

(Book 6) In response, Hector firmly rejected his wife's suggestion, adamant that any attempt to shirk his responsibilities as a warrior would brand him "a coward," as well as run the risk of delivering Andromache into Greek slavery, should the Trojan defenses fail (Book 6). In this way, Homer subtly introduced a new element into his vision of the gender hierarchy. Andromache's suggestion was not inappropriate simply because she ought to be subservient to Hector, but because it would have been disastrous. Andromache appeals to Hector's love of his family, but this appeal was a poisoned chalice – if Hector accepted, it would have surely mean the loss of Troy and the destruction of said family. In short, though brief, Hector and Andromache's interaction was critical to Homerism's construction of a workable gender hierarchy – transforming its importance into one of life and death.

Confucianism echoed this message, with Pan Chao noting how "A man though born like a wolf may, it is feared, become a weak monstrosity; a woman though born like a mouse, may, it is feared, become a tiger." (Pan Chao, *Lessons for a Woman*, Respect and Caution) In Confucius' thought system, though women were, preferably, deferential to men, there still existed a balance between the two genders – complementary forces that worked together to produce harmony characterized by Pan Chao as a "Yin and Yang" earlier in *Lessons For A Woman* (Pan Chao, *Lessons for a Woman*, Husband and Wife). But, as suggested by the image of a woman shunning her gentle, mouselike subservience in favor of a tiger's animosity, women had the ability to disrupt the "Yin and Yang." In turn, this imbalanced the family – a crucial building block of Confucianism's interlocking system of social obligations – an imbalance that ran the risk of spinning out and impacting the rest of society. Pan Chao did not just fortify the existing gender hierarchy, but warned against one that could be – one where women are distemperate heralds of social dissonance.

Thus, when it's all said and done, both Homerism's and Confucianism's hierarchies gestured towards a single, larger truth: that women were dangerous. They raised civilization's children, they controlled the home, they could lead men to calamitous ends, and they could disrupt the delicate consonance that stabilized the community. For this reason, both Homer's and Confucius' gender hierarchies had a little wiggle room. Yes, females were fundamentally acquiescent, but when their influence was so great, it must have been acknowledged in the systems that govern. After all, to completely disregard women would inevitably have resulted in tension – pure anathema to the order-based thought systems of Homer and Confucius. In the latter's case, few women exemplify the ability to work within – and even in a way, “break out of” – the hierarchy better than Pan Chao herself. Wildly intelligent, Pan Chao was able to acquire a literary education, as was permitted for exceptional women such as herself, giving Pan Chao the tools to create and publish her own texts. Under such a system, education, readily available to men, served as a sort of “cheat” for women, permitting some degree of hierarchical mobility within the bounds of the Confucian structure.

Homerism, too, deviated slightly from its rigid gender hierarchy, albeit via a different avenue: religion. Whilst pieces of war-booty like Briseis were exchanged like objects and Greek women were locked into homebuilding, Goddesses and priestesses held a different sort of position – a position of power, influence, and fear. To illustrate, take Hera, the queen of the gods. She was a woman, but she challenged Zeus' support of the Trojans (Book 1), roused Athene to battle (Book 2), and seduced Zeus to tip the war in favor of the Greek siege (Book 5). Athene was no different, personally engaging in combat and disturbing the fragile peace between the Greeks and the Trojans (Book 4). Athene herself, was portrayed with especially horrifying detail, with a “dreadful tasselled aegis” thrown over her, “crowned at every point with terror, violence

and strife.” (Book 5) These actions and imagery, obviously, did not map onto the image of female timidity put forth by Homer in so much of *The Iliad*.

But, unlike Pan Chao’s exceptionalism, which so obviously slotted into Confucianism, it may have been unclear how these divine women fit into Homer’s gender hierarchy. It is true that Pan Chao’s unusual gifts set her apart from other females, but even Pan Chao was quick to admit that her intelligence did not set her apart from the governing structure – it should not be forgotten that *Lessons for a Woman* began with Pan Chao labelling herself as “the unworthy writer” and “unsophisticated, unenlightened, and by nature unintelligent.” (Pan Chao, *Lessons for a Woman*, Introduction) The space that Pan Chao chiseled out for herself in Confucianist China was unusual, yes, but it was a space ultimately used to further buttress the Chinese gender hierarchy. Goddesses are a more difficult case. Yes, Hera still yielded to Zeus when pressed (Book 1), but she and other goddesses still held immense power – power so immense that it threatened to upset the mortal hierarchy, permitting female figures – goddesses – to alter the fates of men in unprecedented ways.

But, the genius of Homer was that this power was not a way for the gender hierarchy to be disrupted. No, instead it was yet another way in which the Homeric system of thought – and its understanding of women – was preserved. All the proof that is needed was in book six of *The Iliad*, in which Hecabe – alongside the other Trojan wives and daughters – prayed at the shrine of Athene (Book 6). Though initially innocuous, the importance of this prayer could not be overstated. Prayer required the women to prostrate themselves before Athene – to beg her to “take pity” on the city of Troy. The women of the city submitted to Athene; the goddess’ power having induced worship, which in turn enforced subservience before a greater power – mirroring the subservience of women in the face of men, as prized by Homer’s thought system. In this

moment, the power of Athene was transformed – no longer just an expression of divinity, it became another tool used to enforce a gendered hierarchy, canceling out the mold-breaking might of the goddess.

So (a) certain values were desirable within Homeric and Confucianist gender hierarchies and (b) these hierarchies were enforced through several interesting methods – an interest in the female condition suggesting that women were important to the aforementioned hierarchies. The reason why women were so critical was simple: the family. As mentioned earlier in the “Catalogue of Ships,” patrilineal lines defined the many policies that compose the Greek confederacy. But, without the home – controlled by women – these patrilineal lines would have been infinitely more fragile. There would be no one to tend to the household, no one to take care of educational considerations, nor anyone to raise the polity’s children. Without children, there was no ancestry. And without ancestry, there was no thrust behind a leader’s claim to power. The same sentiment held true in Confucianist thought, as disruption of the “Yin and Yang” dynamic between men and women – developed by Pan Chao – meant the disturbance of the balance and harmony valued so highly amongst Confucianists.

Women were not the only groups confined by hierarchical networks, yet in terms of Confucianist and Homeric thought, they held special weight. There was much more to understand about gender in Greece and China, but an understanding of how the female identity fit into each society’s complex social hierarchies was crucial to understanding Greek and Chinese values and goals – especially in the context of the family.