

Chinese gender Relations –Ancient Period

Introduction Chinese society in the late neolithic and early bronze ages developed largely independent of other ancient societies. As a result, there are a number of distinctive features infrequently seen in other areas of the ancient world. How or why this combination of attributes emerged as it did is not known. Nonetheless, these achievements: a strict patriarchy and social structure built on Confucian and Daoists ethics; a strong, highly centralized, interventionist government in an era when that was rarely seen; and a commitment to social order and the greater good over individual rights and liberty, converged to produce an ideal that has endured for more than 4000 years. Of course, there have been periods of divergence and of great social disruption, such as the integration of Buddhism, the Mongol invasions, and the leveling of society under communism. Indeed, each ruler and every generation have left their own mark on China. Nevertheless, the idea of “China”—its identity—has remained steadfast in essential ways across many different epochs, at least among the ruling elites. Chinese civilization, despite interludes and discontinuity, has endured.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Gender relationships. Daughters were likely married out but sons likely were not. Women were pregnant for many if not most of their childbearing years and often died in childbirth. Men hunted, fished and fought, and suffered injury and death from those activities. Though likely, it is not known whether serial monogamy was practiced in mating partners. Boys learned life skills from older men in the group and girls learned from older women. To the extent possible, families cared for the old and infirm, although few would have survived into their dotage. The struggle to survive in an age where disease, injury and unexpected death were constant companions even for the young and healthy provides context for social relationships. It indicates that flexibility and utilitarianism must surely have governed most of humanity. Orphans must have been adopted, widows remarried and wanderers taken in.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

Gender. In bronze age China, gender roles were well established. Family units were dominated by a patriarchy and women were rarely allowed to participate in public life. This attitude reflects the social milieu just before the time of Confucius, who taught that only men were head of household and women bore children and took care of the family. In particular, women were expected to bear a son who would eventually become head of household and pass on the family name. This was her foremost duty. Still, peasant women worked alongside their husband in the rice paddies during the labor intensive planting and harvesting season. As the Zhou dynasty began to decline, in the 7th century BCE, the fighting season began to lengthen. Men went to fight, kill and be killed, thereby leaving many women the total responsibility for subsistence and family life for longer periods of time. Of course, social convention often did not (and still does not) apply to aristocratic women, some of whom emerged to become prominent figures in society.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Gender. Along with Confucianism, which restricted the position of women in society, Daoism also played a role in the social structure. The concept of yin and yang illustrates this duality. Women were understood to represent yin: passive, soft and reflective. Yin was associated with darkness and carried a negative connotation in Chinese society. Men represented yang, which is active and assertive. It was associated with light and positive energy. These forces: light and darkness, positive and negative, hard and soft, active and passive help to maintain harmony in the universe. For iron age Chinese, this was the natural order of the world. However, it should be noted that, theoretically, neither side was to dominate the other. Instead, they were to complement each other. By the time of the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the legal system had relegated women to second-class status. Women could only be head of household if there was no adult male and were never able to initiate divorce proceeding from their husband for any reason. And, of course, men of means could take as many concubines as they desired and could afford.