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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Growing Up in the Inner Chambers in Late Tang Times: Moral Duties and Social Expectations

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This study proposes to explore the moral precepts, daily duties, and ritual practices addressed to young girls in the late Tang 唐 period (eighth to tenth century). It relies on works written for women by women, which on the one hand reproduced some of the female tasks and virtues codified during the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), but on the other introduced a number of time-specific innovations. These ranged from changes in religious beliefs, particularly due to the predominant role of Buddhism and Daoism in post-Han society, to the alteration of women's domain of personal relationships, especially regarding their husbands, family members, and guests. By intercepting and highlighting such elements of discontinuity within preexisting tradition, this paper will analyse how young girls' domain of agency within the family (the inner chambers) and the broader society changed over time. Moreover, through the examination of moral and ritual elements of female education, this work will provide fresh insights into how the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers were understood in the late Tang period, with a particular emphasis on their complementarity, rather than subordination, to male figures. The selected texts examined below, all belonging to the *nüxun* 女訓 (female instruction) genre of the late Tang period, will be treated as invaluable sources of the cultural history of women and family units between the eighth and tenth centuries.

本文旨在探究唐末女子教育以及女性在社會和日常生活中的道德義務。主要通過由女性爲教導女子撰寫的作品如女孝經、女論語等分析唐代婦女和家庭教育的特點及其與漢代的區別。隨著社會與家庭的演變，女訓在唐代也衍生出新的特點，其中夫妻關係、主客禮儀、宗教信仰等都有時代的烙印。文章將重新評估唐末女性在家庭和社會中的地位並展示對女性道德期望的嬗變。

Keywords: Tang education, Han education, nüxun, womanly duties, social expectations

關鍵詞：唐代教育，漢代教育，女訓，女工，社會期望

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Introduction

What did it mean to grow up as a woman during the Tang dynasty (618–907)? The varied repertoire of archaeological and textual sources available today draws a complex and fascinating picture of the female condition during the Chinese medieval period. Aside from the most notable political figures such as Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), Empress Wei 韋 (d. 710), and the imperial consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756), the extraordinary diversity of women's experiences during the Tang is exemplified by their many achievements and contributions to a number of fields.[1] However, in a world still largely based on the traditional cosmological assumption, inherited from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), that the male element (*yang* 陽) dominated the female element (*yin* 陰),[2] the historical and legal records of the time failed to take into account the complexity of women's lives, and consistently depicted them in their roles of daughters, wives, and mothers (Hinsch 2020, 9; Pissin 2012, 45–46).

By adapting to the exceptional socio-cultural transformation of the period, including the slow decline of aristocratic families, the renewal of the examination system, and the revitalisation of Confucianism, women readily found alternative ways to make up for their exclusion from the public domain, such as by consolidating their power within the family realm (Hinsch 2020, 29) or by cultivating literary talents. Education, interpreted as the process through which the intellectual and moral potential of a child is developed (Kinney, 1995, 12), offers an interesting glimpse into how Tang girls were shaped into their roles, and into the tools they used to empower themselves within the

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[1] For a comprehensive and recent examination of women's role in Tang society see Hinsch (2020), which provided useful theoretical resources for the revision of this study, alongside Ko's (1994) pioneering work on women's cultural history in Ming-Qing China.

[2] The reevaluation of the hierarchical relationship between *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 dates back to the Han period, when Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179–104 BCE) presented evidence from canonical texts suggesting that the former was subordinate to the latter. Drawing from cosmological theories that discussed the position and interrelation of Heaven (*tian* 天) and Earth (*di* 地), or *qian* 乾 ("pure yang") and *kun* 坤 ("pure yin") in the universal order, Han Confucianism paved the way for a new hierarchical world view, which advocated gender-specific roles and the differentiation of duties, relegating women to the domestic sphere. For recent discussions on Dong Zhongshu's theories and how these affected gender relations from the Han dynasty, see Indraccolo 2011, IX-X, and Pang-White 2018, 31-37.

boundaries of social expectations. Hence, this study will explore the educational practices aimed at young women from the late Tang period and how these affected their position and relations within the family. It will focus on the era of political turmoil following the An Lushan 安祿山 (755–763) rebellion, when growing anxiety for the fate of the state brought about a revival of strict Confucian etiquette. Such an attitude was reflected in the books for female instruction (*nüxun* 女訓),[3] which were texts written by women and addressed to female readers from various social strata. These works on the one hand reproduced some of the female tasks and virtues codified during the Han dynasty, but on the other introduced a number of time-specific innovations. Given the prescriptive nature of these texts and the impossibility of attesting to what extent their teachings were put into practice in daily life, this study will not venture into a micro-historical investigation of the actual living conditions of late Tang girls, but it will rather act as a testament of the increasing "popularisation" of Confucian education and how this was adapted to the ever-changing Tang society.[4]

Women and the inner chambers in the Early Imperial period

In order to effectively understand how precepts and practices of female instruction changed under the Tang, it is necessary to look back at the Han period, when pedagogical theories were refined and integrated into broader cosmological discussions, and moral education became associated with the ideal of a peaceful and stable society. The new form of Confucianism that emerged in this period also had a long-lasting

[3] The *nüxun* 女訓 (instructions for women) tradition existed from at least the Eastern Han period (25–220 CE), thanks to Ban Zhao 班昭's (c. 45–117 CE) *Nü jie* 女誡, (Admonitions for Women, c. 100 CE), the earliest extant text specifically aimed at the education of women. The text comprised a preface and seven chapters, which illustrated the wifely way (*fudao* 婦道), namely the recommended conduct, domestic duties, relationship with one's husband, parents-in-law, and other members of the family, etc. *Nü jie* set the trend for its genre and became the source of inspiration for generations of *nüxun* authors. As we shall see in the following sections, *Nü jie* was later included in *Nü sishu* 女四書 (Four Books for Women), the codified canon of conduct books for women. For a detailed examination of the *Nü sishu* with an annotated translation in English, quoted in this study, see Pang-White 2018. See also Indraccolo 2011, who translated and analysed the canon in Italian.

[4] This feature is particularly evident in the *Nü lunyu* 女論語 (Analects for women), which will be examined in the following sections; see Hinsch 2020, 99.

impact on the role of women within the family and in the broader society. The redefinition of social hierarchy during the Han reinforced the ritual boundary between genders, exemplified by the principle of "differentiation between men and women (*nannü zhi bie* 男女之別)", which prescribed specific, but complementary, sets of obligations which male and female members of a family had to fulfil (Li-Hsiang 2004, 47). In discussing gender-specific roles and duties and how, from the early imperial era, these gradually came to regulate man-woman relationships, it is also essential to delineate the particular domains associated with their sphere of agency: the binary *nei/wai* 內/外 (interior/exterior). Traditionally connected with the Western dualistic concept of private/public, and generally blamed for the perceived static structure of Chinese society, the *nei/wai* formula has already been examined in a broader philosophical framework and proved to be more "prescriptive than descriptive of how gender relations really worked" (Ko 1994, 12).

Early canonical texts provide significant contributions towards reconstructing the narrative of gender differentiation: in the *Yijing* 易經 or *Zhouyi* 周易 (Classic of Changes), for instance, this distinction relied on the observance of specific duties (or "positions" *zheng wei* 正位), which for women tended toward the administration of domestic affairs (*nei*), while men were projected outward to the external sphere and dealt with public matters:

> "The principle of righteousness of Heaven and Earth [prescribes] that, within the family, the proper place of a woman is the interior, while the proper place of a man is the exterior (家人，女正位乎內，男正位乎外，天地之大義也)."[5]

A few centuries later, the *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Rites), compiled in the early Han period, introduced a new dimension to *nei/wai*, as they were shaped into physical spaces, often separated by real or conventional margins that were not to be crossed:

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[5] See ZYJJ 8. 1. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, library and archival access at the time of writing was extremely limited. I have therefore consulted and used either published primary sources or translations, which have sometimes been adapted. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

> "The observances of propriety commence with a careful attention to the relations between husband and wife. They built their mansion and its apartments, distinguishing between exterior and interior parts. The men occupied the exterior; the woman the interior. [⋯] The men did not enter the interior, the women did not come out into the exterior (禮，始於謹夫婦，為宮室，辨外內。男子居外，女子居內 [⋯]。男不入，女不出。)." (Legge 1967, 470)

In light of these normative precepts, the "interior" or "inner chambers" (my translation choice for "*nei*" when applied to the specific context of a household) could actually symbolise the reclusive condition of Chinese women, the limit within which their agency extended. However, if we look at the family as a microcosm for Chinese society, we notice that the *nei/wai* boundaries were continuously renegotiated as the historical context changed (Ko 1994, 13) and so was their dwellers' sphere of influence.

It was also during the Han period that women were fully legitimised as educators, when the authoritative thinker Liu Xiang 劉向's (77–6 BCE) *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women) introduced mothers as the primary agents of the moral development of a child.[6] Hence, as the prescribed space of agency for women, the inner chambers came to epitomise the place where life was generated, education was imparted, and where mothers could fully exert their power. A woman's role in shaping children's temperaments began even before giving birth with the so-called *taijiao* 胎教 (foetal education), which required future mothers to follow a strict code of discipline in their posture, moral conduct, eating, and sleeping habits in order to favour the correct development of their baby.[7] The mother-child relationship was particularly nurtured in the first few years after their birth, when morally outstanding '*mu* 母' (mothers, female elders) acted as primary caregivers and looked after the physical and moral

6 See the "Preface" to "The Maternal Models (Muyi 母儀)" translated by Kinney (2014, 1).

7 Examples of foetal or prenatal education date back to the pre-Han period, although the term first appeared in Jia Yi 賈誼's (201–169 BCE) *Xinshu* 新書 (New Writings). It was based on the idea that a child's development in the womb was interconnected with environmental influences to which pregnant women were subjected. Although *taijiao* practices were not equally followed at all social strata, they were also revitalised by Neo-Confucian education during the Song period. See Kinney 1995, 27-28, for a study of the Han *taijiao*, and Pissin 2009, 246–250, for its significance in Tang China.

wellbeing of children. Although young boys and girls could enjoy relative freedom within the household until the age of six *sui* 歲, waking up late and eating whenever they wanted (Legge 1967, 452), between the ages of six and nine they still followed a similar educational path and were exposed to the same rudiments of literacy, numerical training, and some aspects of ritual propriety.[8] The turning point happened at the age of ten *sui*: it was at that moment that boys were projected out to the external world, leaving home to be initiated into the earliest stages of their education, while girls were confined behind the closed doors of the inner chambers to begin learning womanly work.

> "A girl at the age of ten ceased to go out (from the women's apartments). Her governess taught her (the arts of) pleasing speech and manners, to be docile and obedient, to handle hempen fibres, to deal with the cocoons, to weave silks and form fillets, learn (all) woman's work, how to furnish garments, to watch sacrifices, to supply liquors and sauces, to fill the various stands and dishes with pickles and brine, and to assist in setting forth the appurtenances for the ceremonies. (女子十年不出，姆教婉娩聽從，執麻枲，治絲繭，織紝組紃，學女事以共衣服，觀於祭祀，納酒漿、籩豆、菹醢，禮相助奠.)" (Legge, 1967, 479)

The age of ten *sui*, therefore, marked an important moment in the life of young children: as their educational paths went separate ways, their spheres of agency were also sharply redefined. Outside of the domestic domain, boys established their first external bond with a master, who was in charge of teaching them the literary and ritual knowledge required to become a valid member of society,[9] while girls began their personal cultivation under the supervision of their mothers and other female members of

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[8] "At six years, they are taught numbers and the names of the cardinal points; at the age of seven, boys and girls did not occupy the same mat nor eat together; at eight, when going out or coming in at a gate or door, and when going to their mats to eat or drink, they were required to follow their elders: the teaching of yielding to others was now begun; at nine, they were taught how to number the days. (六年教之數與方名。七年男女不同席，不共食。八年出入門戶及即席飲食，必後長者，始教之讓。九年教之數日。)" See Legge, 1967, 478.

[9] As we shall see below, the educational process was inevitably strongly entangled with the socio-cultural context. In the early imperial period, for instance, the basic rules of propriety and etiquette for boys (*you yi* 幼儀) were a part of elementary learning (*xiaoxue* 小學) alongside reading (*shu* 書) and counting (*shu* 數). From the age of 13, children were initiated in the "great arts" (*dayi* 大藝), which comprised propriety (*li* 禮), music (*yue* 樂), archery (*she* 射),

the family. Female education had one specific purpose: preparing daughters for marriage and providing them with the means to execute their future duties as wives and mothers. Literacy was therefore not deemed as necessary to their place and obligations within the family, which were embodied in the *sancong side* 三從四德 (three followings and four virtues).The idea that a woman, in order to comply with the righteous Way, should "follow (*cong* 從)" her father and older brother in her natal family, or husband or son after her marriage, had its roots in the *Liji* and was meant to become one of the "pillars of Confucian ethics" alongside the *nei/wai* differentiation (Pang-White 2018, 43; Ko 1994, 6). It was also the *Liji* that mentioned the *side* for the first time, as teachings that young women received in the three months preceding their wedding.[10] These norms of conduct were transmitted to the Tang dynasty mainly thanks to Ban Zhao 班昭's (c. 45–117 CE) *Nü jie* 女誡 (Admonitions for Women, c. 100 CE), which was utilised alongside *Lienü zhuan* as core material for education in the inner chambers (Hinsch 2020, 92).

As we shall see in the following sections, while continuing to take Ban Zhao as the highest authority in the domain of female instruction, Tang educators did not solely rely on past models, but strove to find time-specific solutions to the new challenges and social issues they were facing.

Society, family and education in the Tang dynasty

By the time the Sui (581–618) and Tang reunited "all under Heaven", the physical and cultural boundaries between *nei* and *wai* had already shifted many times, redesignating the notions of "civility and bestiality" and "centre and periphery" of the empire.[11]

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and charioteering (*yu* 御). For an overview on traditional education in imperial China, see Bai 2005, 21-46. From the Tang period onwards, upper class families gradually started neglecting martial skills such as archery and charioteering in favour of a more erudite approach to instruction, in accordance with the transformation taking place within the aristocratic system (Ebrey 2010, 114).

[10] "Therefore, anciently, for three months before the marriage of a young lady, [...] she was taught the wifely virtues, speech, appearance, and work. (是以古者婦人先嫁三月 [...] 教以婦德、婦言、婦容、婦功)" Adapted from Legge 1967, 432.

[11] For an insightful discussion on *nei/wai* as a special boundary between the imperial court and the outside world, see Li-Hsiang 2010, 42–44.

A number of additional dramatic changes characterised the almost three centuries of Tang rule, from the consolidation of the bureaucratic system at governmental level to the blossoming of extended families[12] and the slow but inexorable "Confucianisation" of the cultural elite (Knapp 2005, 13–21). Such a complex, vibrant society was reflected in the revitalised educational programme aimed at the younger generations, which started with emperor Taizong 太宗's (r. 626–649) modernised curriculum and opening of official schools (Bai 2005, 25). Following the reform of the examination system in the late seventh century, literary education acquired an increasing importance among elite families, and was fostered alongside moral cultivation by making use of canonical books (Pissin 2009, 215).

With regard to what constituted the literary canon in Tang times, the two official histories offer a slightly different explanation. While the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old Book of Tang), compiled during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–979), spoke of 12 literary categories that qualified as "*jing* 經 (classic, canonical text)", the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (New Book of Tang) of the Song dynasty (960–1279) recorded only 11.[13] In both histories the "elementary learning (*xiaoxue* 小學)" section comprised materials for the acquisition of characters and pronunciation (*ziti shengyun* 字體聲韻), thus marking a differentiation between works on literary skills and conduct books, such as the *Liji*, the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety), and the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects). In quantitative terms, literary productions of the "elementary learning" genre amounted to 797 volumes in the *Jiu Tangshu* and to 2,045 volumes in the *Xin Tangshu*, featuring mostly wordbooks or primers for speech eloquence.

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[12] There is general scholarly consensus that family units gradually became larger and more complex from at least the Eastern Han period. This phenomenon was initially more evident within the elite class, but by the Tang dynasty it extended to all social strata. As reported by Knapp, the average family on the tax register from AD 747 had 6.3 people, while 25% of registered families counted over nine members. For a comprehensive examination of the evolution of extended families and the reasons behind this, see Knapp 2005, 13–17.

[13] These included: "*Yi* 易 (Changes)", "*Shu* 書 (Documents)", "*Shi* 詩 (Odes)", "*Li* 禮 (Rites)", "*Yue* 樂 (Music)", "*Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn [Annals])", "*Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety)", "*Lunyu* 論語 (Analects)", "*Chenwei* 讖緯 (Confucian divinatory books)", "*Jingjie* 經解 (Commentaries)", and "*Xiaoxue* 小學 (Elementary learning)". The *Jiu Tangshu* differentiated between three types of "divinatory (*chenhou* 讖候)" works: "*tuwei* 圖緯", "*jingjie* 經解", and "*guxun* 詁訓". In the *Xin Tangshu* the first and the third category were clustered under the "Confucian divinatory books" genre, which began circulating from the Eastern Han period (XTS, 57.1451).

Authoritative texts aimed at girls' moral instruction, such as Liu Xiang's *Lienü zhuan* and Ban Zhao's *Nüjie*, featured respectively in the "Histories section (*shibu* 史部)" and in the "Masters section (*zibu* 子部)" of the *Jiu Tangshu* and were a testament to the increasingly prominent status conferred upon female education (JTS 33. 122–123). In the *Xin Tangshu* the *nüxun* genre reached full maturity, as it appeared as a stand-alone category and came to include a number of innovative literary productions of the time, such as empress Zhang Sun 長孫's (601–636) *Nüze* 女則 (Rules for Girls), Wang Fangqing 王方慶's (d. 702) *Nüji* 女紀 (Records for women), and the *Nü lunyu* 女論語 (Analects for women) by the Song sisters (XTS 58.160–161).

The development of female pedagogical literature undoubtedly reflected an increasing acknowledgement of educated women's contributions to the domestic and public sphere. As persuasively argued in a popular mid-Tang treatise, *Tai gong jiajiao* 太公家教 (Master Tai's Family Education): "If you don't educate girls as you raise them, you might as well raise pigs [instead]. (養女不教，不如養豬)" (Zhou 2005, 20). Poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–858) held similar views, and considered it an "unjust treatment (*wangqu* 枉屈)" not to educate girls in the same way as boys.[14] Thus, Tang families took the business of female instruction very seriously, as attested to by a number of anecdotes in *the Jiu Tangshu* and the *Xin Tangshu* (Zheng and Zhu, 2002, 413–415). Mothers once again held primary responsibility for the education process, although it was not uncommon for female masters (*mushi* 姆師) to tutor the daughters of prominent families. When mothers were not present, other family members took charge of their role, with fathers or older siblings acting *in loco matris*, as in the case of Song Ruoxin 宋若莘 (768–820), credited as the compiler of the famous *Nü lunyu* and described as a strict instructor of her four sisters.[15]

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[14] See *Yishan zazuan* 義山雜纂 (Miscellaneous Records by Yishan), quoted from Zhou 2005, 20. Li Shangyin's benevolent attitude towards the children of his family, particularly girls, is also attested to by the requiem he wrote for his niece Jiji, who died only a few months after her birth. Although the piece does not advocate education, it speaks in direct terms of an uncle's deep affection for his prematurely lost niece and of ritual propriety for the burial of children: "With the help of geomancers I have chosen a plot for your grave and a tombstone with an inscription. I know I am doing more than what proprieties would allow for a child, but how can I do less than my deep feelings demand?" See Wu 1995, 141–142.

[15] Biographic information on the Song sisters is recorded in the JTS 77.351 and XTS 52.263. See also Zhou 2005, 23.

In terms of purpose and content, Tang *nüxun* works were conceived as material for the cultivation of the wifely way (*fudao* 婦道), which integrated rules of conduct, literary skills, and housework (*nügong* 女工). As we shall see in the following section, the authors looked at the Han, particularly at Ban Zhao, as everlasting examples of virtue, but did not hesitate to adapt her teachings to the current times. The following examination is based on two of the most influential treatises of Tang female education: the *Nü xiaojing* 女孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety for Women) compiled in the mid-eighth century by Madam Zheng 鄭氏,[16] and the aforementioned *Nü lunyu*, composed by Song Ruoxin and revised by her sister Ruozhao 若昭 (761–828).[17] These made use of Ban Zhao's authoritative voice to establish an ideal dialogue with young, unmarried ladies and to impart a series of moral lessons, which would enable them to perform all the duties required in their new family roles. Due to the modest literacy of their readership, these texts were written in clear, if colloquial, language, although they also included quotations from other canonical works. The literary and pedagogical value of the *Nü xiaojing* and the *Nü lunyu* was meant to transcend the Tang period: during the Ming dynasty these two works became part of the *Nü sishu* 女四書 (Four Books for Women), alongside Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* and Empress Renxiaowen 仁孝文's (1361–1407) *Neixun* 內訓 (Instructions for the Inner Quarters, 1405). The *Nü sishu* echoed the Neo-Confucian canon codified during the Song dynasty, thus conferring indisputable authority on their precepts. However, during the Qing period (1644–1911) the

[16] According to Hinsch, this text had limited influence during the Tang, but was rediscovered and widely disseminated during the Song (Hinsch 2020, 96). Notwithstanding this, it has been included in this examination as a testament to aristocratic education during the Tang period. This study is based on Murray 1988, 95–129, whose work focused on the Song illustrations of the text but also provided a comprehensive analysis of most of the content, and on Woo 2002, 132–143, who compared the *Xiaojing* and the *Nü xiaojing*. My translations are based on a 1991 reprint of the original text.

[17] The authorship of this unquestionably influential work is still the subject of an ongoing debate. Some scholars have highlighted that the text could be a later forgery, since it does not appear written in dialogue form, as stated in the official histories. The original form also comprised only ten chapters, two less than the existing version. While the controversy has not yet been settled, Chen contended that the current edition could be an explanation (*shenshi* 申釋) Ruozhao compiled from her sister's work, written in colloquial language so as to reach a broader audience (Chen 1995, 68); in a more recent study, Yamazaki argued that the text might actually have been authored by Madame Wei 韋氏, the wife of the ninth-century poet Xue Meng 薛蒙, and based on Ban Zhao's *Nü jie* (Yamazaki 2002, 109; Hinsch 2020, 190). For an introduction and translation of the text, including a study of the authors and historical background, see Pang-White 2018, 71–77, and Indraccolo 2011, 21–46 (in Italian). When quoting from Pang-White's translation, only key terms in Chinese will be provided.

Nü xiaojing was replaced by another Ming text, Madame Liu 劉氏's *Nüfan jielu* 女範捷錄 (Short Records of Models for Women, c. 1580).

It would be restrictive to consider Tang education a mere prerogative of the aristocratic or official families, through which they could propagate old-fashioned values or maintain the *status quo*. In fact, the instruction of children was a preoccupation that united all social strata and was perceived just as strongly at the centre as it was at the periphery of the empire, as demonstrated by the flourishing educational environment in Dunhuang 敦煌.[18] Approximately 250 texts aimed at instructing children were brought to light in the excavations, among which were 110 books on moral conduct (Zhu 2005: 39). Their content showcases two main points: that educational practices were still gender-specific[19] and that female instruction was considered a *conditio sine qua non* for the successful management of the family. Most precepts addressing girls' moral cultivation are scattered throughout the various Tang *jiaxun* 家訓 (family instructions), with the only complete work being the *Cuishi furen xunnü wen* 崔氏夫人訓女文 (*Madame Cui's essay for instructing girls,* hereinafter *Cuishi furen*), a short *nüxun* poem that was popular in Dunhuang towards the end of the dynasty.[20] This was a seven-character rhymed essay, written by an anonymous woman on the day of her daughter's wedding. The name in the title is thought to be an alias, as the Cuis 崔 were one of the most prominent families in the northeast, whose women were regarded as highly desirable spouses by most scholar-officials (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413; Zhao

[18] The scholarly literature that reconstructs the educational environment in late-Tang Dunhuang integrates textual analysis and material culture. It provides evidence that the complex network of schools and institutions set up at prefectural and county level, the so-called *liu xue er guan* 六學二館, extended as far as Dunhuang (Zhou 2005, 20). Between the ninth and tenth centuries 25 schools were active in the area, which were run either by the government, Buddhist temples, or private owners (Zhao 2006, 91). Even if schooling was flourishing in all areas of the empire, it was still a privilege granted only to boys, as excavated texts and wall paintings seem to confirm (Zhao 2006, 91). For comprehensive studies of the pedagogical theories and materials in Dunhuang, see Wang 1957; Zheng and Zhu 2002.

[19] Buddhist prayers are even more exemplificative in this respect, as demonstrated by Pissin's study (2009, 219–221). As an example of the gender-tailored purpose of Tang education see the following verses from *Fumu enzhong jing jiangjing wen* 父母恩重经讲经文: "Boys must be cultured and benevolent; girls should [know how to] cut and sew [clothes] and play wind and stringed instruments (男須文墨兼仁義, 女要裁縫及管弦。) (Wang 1957, 687).

[20] The background and circulation of the texts are examined in Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413–414; Zhu 2005, 40–41 and Zhao 2006, 92. The first also includes a transcription of *Cuishi furen*, which is used as source for my translation and analysis.

2006, 92). Given the popularity of the text among commoner families in Dunhuang, Zhu suggested that the poem was composed by an aristocratic woman in the capital and was somehow copied and put on the market, as attested to by the seal of the Li printing house, rediscovered on one of the three editions of the work (Zhu 2005, 41). Madame Cui's teachings are presented through the touching words of a mother to her parting daughter, whose tears reveal the reality behind the overly-celebrated rite of marriage. In simple language the text deals with tropes recurring in other *nüxun* books, such as moral conduct, the relationships with the husband and in-laws, and the importance of womanly work, thus restating that gender-specific expectations transcended social status and personal background.

Content of the Tang *nüxun*

As previously observed, female instruction remained strictly relegated to the inner chambers even as the structure and composition of family units changed over time. Women acted as role models for their younger family members and held primary responsibility for the successful outcome of their formation: "A strict mother brings up a chaste daughter, a strict father brings up a virtuous man (嚴母出貞女，嚴父出賢良)" stated the *Biancai jiajiao* 辯才家教 (Family instructions on eloquence), drawing from the long-established trope of gender-specific moral qualities. In stressing the mother-daughter connection in the educational process, the *Taigong jiajiao* also indicated that: "The method for raising daughters [prescribes that] they should not be allowed to leave their mother's side. (育女之法，莫聽離母)" (Zhu 2005, 41).

Young ladies from different social backgrounds all shared a turning point in their lives: marriage. This was the rite of passage that marked the transition from being someone's daughter to becoming someone's wife, with all the pressure and responsibility that came with being incorporated into another family. "As a daughter at home you used to receive love and tenderness; today, as someone's wife, (you) believe in predestination (在家作女慣嬌憐, 今作他婦信前緣)" (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413), stated *Cuishi*

furen, introducing the Buddhist concept of "*yuanfen* 緣分 (destiny, predestined affinity or relationship)" to convey a sense of ineluctability to the marital bond.[21]

Girls prepared for this event from an early age: marriage was the ultimate purpose of their childhood education, when they learned how to be obedient, diligent, and filial, so that they could meet their role-specific expectations and avoid bringing shame to their paternal family. "Respect and support [your] parents-in-law, respect and serve [your] husband, treat older and younger family members with affection, and instruct sons and daughters (孝養家翁，敬事夫主，親愛尊卑，教示男女)": such were the duties of a new bride according to the *Taigong jiajiao* (Zhu 2005, 41), which also highlighted how women's domain of agency changed after marriage. After bidding farewell to their family, they moved to a new reality, where they became chiefly responsible for the inner chambers, along with household management, internal harmony, and, as mothers, for the literary and moral education of children.

So, what characterised Tang female instruction, particularly in comparison with the Han period? In what way were precepts and practices influenced by the socio-cultural environment of the time? To address these questions, this study will draw from the aforementioned *nüxun* texts to highlight the most distinctive trends of Tang female education in three specific areas: a. Natal family; b. Husband's family; and c. Social dimension.

a. Natal family

The implications marriage had on a girl's life can be inferred from the two characters that convey the meaning "to marry (of a woman)": "*jia* 嫁", which includes the pho-

[21] As products of their specific socio-cultural background, conduct books in the Tang dynasty integrated precepts from the Confucian morality, widely followed among elite families, with elements of the syncretic religious environment of the time. The aforementioned *Biancai jiajiao* is representative of this trend (Zhu 2005, 41-42). The concept of "predestination" in marriage appeared also in chapter seven of the *Nü lunyu*: " [What was] set by fate in a previous life, today results in marriage (前生緣分，今世婚姻)." For an examination of the various religious references in the *Nü lunyu*, see Pang-White 2018, 75–77.

netic component "*jia* 家 (family)", and "*gui* 歸", which hints at the concept of "belonging". Being married into a new family meant in some periods (particularly after the Song dynasty) almost completely cutting ties with one's parents, something that added a strong emotional dimension to this crucial event.[22] However, little is told about the bride-to-be's feelings in *nüxun* texts: girls were reminded of their lowly status and of their wifely duties, but these impersonal precepts seemed to imply a blind, resigned acceptance of their fate. In this context, the first two couplets of *Cuishi furen* appear almost refreshing: "The fragrant carriage and treasured horse compete in splendour, while you, my daughter, weep in sincere sorrow in front of the ancestral hall. Today I urge you not to cry, for three days after the wedding you will be able to return for a visit. (香車寶馬競爭輝， 少女堂前哭正悲。吾今勸汝不須哭， 三日拜堂還得歸.)" (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413). While these verses provide reassurance that the mother-daughter bond was not to be completely severed after the wedding, there is no doubt about the challenges that await the new bride as she moves from being the recipient of education to becoming a future educator. Given the prominent value attributed to marriage and the social expectations associated with it, it is not surprising that the most popular *nüxun* texts emphasised the role of wife (and educator) over that of daughter. Ban Zhao's *Nü jie* was specifically composed for her daughters, who were approaching the age of marriage, but had "not learned the proper rituals of being a married woman" (Pang-White 2018, 40), whereas Madame Zheng addressed her instructions to her "unrefined (*temeng* 特蒙)" niece, who was about to become Prince Yong's consort (NXJ intro. 2). An exception to this trend can be seen in *Nü lunyu*, which clearly indicated the natal family as the origin of education, and reserved the first five chapters for the duties and moral qualities a daughter needed to cultivate. Chapter one stated that a girl's priority was to establish her person (*li shen* 立身) through fostering chastity and tranquillity. Only after mastering proper conduct and understanding differentiation ("men and women should manage the inner and outer

[22] This was, however, not the case during the Tang period. As demonstrated by Hisch's study, brides were often encouraged to preserve good relations with their parents, even if they were legally members of their husband's family. For a detailed examination of marriage practices during the Tang, see Hinsch 2020, 11–28.

sphere respectively (内外各處，男女異群)": Pang-White 2018, 83) could a girl become familiar with womanly work (*nügong* 女工) and etiquette (*lishu* 禮數). While being diligent at housework and carrying on the family ancestral rites were also crucial stages of Ban Zhao's educational process, she believed personal cultivation began with a woman becoming aware of her lowly and weak status (*beiruo* 卑弱), and bracing for a lifetime of service and unrewarded sacrifice.[23]

The Song sisters' focus on daughters' duties culminates in chapter five: "Serving one's parents (*shi fumu* 事父母)." At home, girls were expected to look after their parents' wellbeing, attending to their food and clothes and assisting them, particularly when they were ill. These filial acts, which draw extensively from the *Liji*, demonstrate that Tang women were perceived as more than just wives, while their natal family was credited for providing the natural environment to train them in the *sancong side*. After all, a daughter's success or failure in her wifely duties had an inevitable effect on her family's reputation, as eloquently summarised in "*Bai shilang zan* 白侍郎讚 (Assistant Minister Bai's Eulogy)," which concluded *Cuishi furen*: "[If a bride] lacks education, the fault falls on her parents (若乏禮儀， 過在父母)" (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413). The trope of how the good name of a family was preserved through the descendants' virtuous deeds permeated most *jiaxun* works, transcending gender and status, but resonated particularly among the crumbling aristocracy of the mid- and late-Tang periods. For women, establishing and maintaining their reputation was inevitably associated with their moral conduct and the cultivation of specific virtues. The *Nü xiaojing* prescribed: "From empresses to commoners, it is unheard of for someone who didn't practice filial piety to be able to establish their reputation (上自皇后，下及庶人，不行孝而成名者，未之聞也)" (NXJ *intro*. 2). Conversely, "to disgrace one's relatives (*ru qin* 辱親)" was frequently used by *nüxun* authors to trigger a sense of shame in the readers and warn them against dishonourable conduct. For instance, this expedient was regularly adopted by the Song sisters when stigmatising specific female behaviour, such as being slack in the housework, learning rituals, treating guests or

[23] In particular, see chapter one of *Nü jie*, Pang-White 2018, 43–47.

relatives, and in educating children.[24] Hence, the key to maintaining a woman's and her family's reputation lay necessarily in strict obedience to moral precepts, as indicated in the original preface of the *Nü lunyu*: "If [young girls] can follow these instructions, they will become virtuous women and will not let our predecessors alone enjoy splendid reputation through the ages" (Pang-White 2018, 81).

b. Husband's family

A couplet from the *Shijing*, quoted in the *Nü xiaojing,* asserted that "When a young woman goes forth (to get married), she distances herself from her parents and siblings (女子有行，遠兄弟父母.)" (NXJ, 6.9). As a fresh addition to the new family, it was the bride's responsibility to establish good relationships with her husband's relatives, starting with winning the affection of her parents-in-law. " (Sons') wives should serve their parents-in-law as they served their own father and mother (婦事舅姑，如事父母)," stated the *Liji* (Legge 1967, 450) demonstrating that, since at least the Han dynasty, this was one of the essential wifely duties and a vital condition to win one's husband's heart (Pang-White 2018, 60–62). Attending to parents-in-law implied both practical and moral responsibilities: providing for their food and clothes, particularly in winter, and assisting them in their daily necessities (Legge 1967, 453), but also conceding to them with blind obedience and complying with their every command regardless of their own opinions.[25] Ban Zhao considered looking after the parents-in-law instrumental to fulfilling the ultimate purpose of a woman's life: honouring the husband-wife relationship and avoiding disgrace.[26] This attitude reflects the scholarly opinion that, during the Han period, the centre of the family "was not the aging parents,

[24] "Do not learn from these lazy women. [...] When they get married, they bring shame to both their natal and matrimonial families (嫁為人婦，恥辱門庭)" (Pang-White 2018, 85-87).

[25] "Do not act contrary to the in-laws' commands regarding right or wrong. Do not argue with them over what is crooked and what is straight." Adapted from Pang-White 2018, 61.

[26] The "seven reasons for repudiating one's wife (*qichu* 七出)" have been known since at least the early Han dynasty, as they were recorded in *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 (School sayings of Confucius), which dates back to that period. According to Tang sources, these included: infertility, licentious behaviour, not serving the parents-in-law, stealing, being belligerent, jealous, and of ill health. See also Hinsch 2020, 27. They were also mentioned in *Nü xiaojing,*

but their able-bodied sons and their wives" (Knapp 2005, 15), a trend that seemingly shifted alongside the societal changes. Both the *Nü xiaojing* and the *Nü lunyu* prioritised the duty of serving parents-in-law over obligations to one's husband: the texts highlighted the parents' role as the "head of the husband's family (夫家之主)" (Pang-White 2018, 98) and restated that they were to be respected and loved as if they were the wife's own mother and father (NXJ, 6.9; Pang-White 2018, 98–99). Moreover, in *Nü xiaojing* the chapter "Serving parents-in-law" echoes the chapter "Serving the sovereign" in *Xiaojing*, reflecting their prominent status in the family hierarchy (Woo 2002, 135–136). While the influence of Han etiquette, particularly that of the *Liji*, appears evident in the description of the rituality addressed to the senior members of the family, *Nü xiaojing* and *Nü lunyu* are innovative in depicting the role of the daughter-in-law. Serving the husband's father and mother was no longer just an indirect tool to strengthen the matrimonial bond, but it was, more broadly, a filial duty that elevated a woman's status to a model for the inner quarters. As explained in Wang Xiang 王相's commentary to the *Nü lunyu*: "Once [a wife] completes the ritual of serving her parents-in-law to its utmost degree, in the inner quarters her sisters-in-law and children will emulate her deeds and follow her teaching" (Pang-White 2018, 100). A daughter-in-law's filiality was therefore perceived as a transformative power and as an indicator of a family's moral status, essential in establishing and preserving their reputation in the neighbourhood.

Confucian tradition considered family to be the microcosm of society and, as such, the husband-wife relationship was equated to the ruler-subject bond. As we have seen, it was during the Han dynasty that an authoritative emphasis was placed on the *yang* element, which was used to restructure the hierarchy of the reciprocal Five Cardinal Human Relationships (*wulun* 五倫) and to cast subjects, wives, and children in a lowly status (Pang-White 2018,10). This position is strongly advocated by Ban Zhao, who was certainly influenced by Dong Zhongshu's theories, although in her opinion a wife's

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where jealousy (*duji* 妒忌) appeared as the "capital offence" a woman could commit to harm her matrimonial bond (NXJ 11.13).

unconditional obedience and respect were as important as a husband's righteous behaviour (i.e. not scolding or beating her) (Pang-White 2018, 20–53). To serve one's husband was therefore justified by his association with Heaven (*tian* 天), the *yang* elements, and strength (*gang* 綱); conversely, a wife's role was equated to Earth (*di* 地), her nature dominated by the *yin* element and by gentleness (*rou* 柔). As expressed in *Nü xiaojing*: "*Yin* and *yang*, strength and gentleness are the essence of Heaven and Earth, while man and woman, husband and wife are the essence of the Human Relationships. [⋯] The husband is Heaven and the wife is Earth, neither of which can be disregarded (陰陽剛柔，天地之始；男女夫婦，人倫之始。婦地夫天，廢一不可)" (NXJ,13.16).

While the trope of "serving one's husband as Earth serves Heaven" continued well into the Tang dynasty, the marital bond, as depicted in the *nüxun* of the time, appears more balanced than during the Han. "When a young woman is married, her husband becomes the head of her person and is the closest relation of all. (女子出嫁，夫主為親)" (Pang-White 2018, 101). The husband was therefore no longer only considered "Heaven" or a hierarchically superior figure, but also "*qin* 親 (an intimate relation)".[27] "[The old saying] comparing a husband to Heaven is not to be taken lightly. The husband ought to be strong and the wife gentle; they should be kind and loving toward one another and should be mutually dependent on each other" (Pang-White 2018, 102). The chapter goes on to illustrate the various ways a wife's thoughtfulness was to be expressed, from keeping her husband's food warm when he returned late to caring for him when he was ill, to avoiding confrontation when he was angry. While still upholding the ideal of differentiation between man and woman, the Song sisters' depiction of wives resembled more that of a companion than a subject. Moreover, a departure from the trope of the quietly obedient spouse presented in the *Nü jie* is particularly evident in the passage: "Should he slide into evil ways, the wife ought to remonstrate with him repeatedly" (Pang-White 2018, 103). The duty of remonstration (*jianzheng* 諫諍) was also strongly reasserted in chapter five of *Nü xiaojing*, where

[27] It should be pointed out that in this sentence, the term "*zhu* 主" could be also interpreted as an adverb, "mainly [regarded as]". See Pang-White 2018, 101.

criticising one's husband was seen as a wife's moral obligation to avoid disaster falling on the family. Drawing from the wife/subject parallelism, the author restated how, in ancient times, remonstration enabled emperors not to lose their *Dao* 道 and to maintain their Heavenly mandate (NXJ 15.18–19). However, it was also essential that disagreements were worked out within the family, to avoid losing one's face in front of strangers, as expressed in these couplets from *Cuishi furen*: "When your husband is drunk inquire [about it] with a smile; as you come forward to receive him, assist him and accompany him to sleep. Don't humiliate or curse him in front of other people: you will certainly be able to express your disappointment once he is sober (夫婿醉來含笑問， 迎前扶侍送安眠。 莫向人前相辱罵， 醒後定是不和顏)" (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413). When stressing a woman's responsibility to contribute to ensuring a harmonious relationship with her husband, as harmonious as the sound "of the *qin* zither and the *se* zither playing together" (Pang-White 2018, 103), Tang *nüxun* authors offered a less subordinate depiction of wives and their roles, thus bringing Heaven and Earth a bit closer together.

c. Social dimension

As we have seen, the Han conduct books mainly relegated women to the interior, limiting their social sphere to their relationships with their husbands or other members of the family. In chapter five of her *Nü jie*, Ban Zhao explicitly stated that, in order to abide by ritual propriety and righteousness, wives were "not to hold parties or gatherings to entertain their [female] peers", nor to "peek outside from inside the house" (Pang-White 2018, 57-59). Guest etiquette was not addressed in this text, with only a brief mention in chapter four, where preparing food for guests was indicated as one of the domestic duties (Pang-White 2018, 54-56). In this respect, the *Nü xiaojing* follows the same line as *Nü jie*, perhaps because they were intended for a similar readership: the young daughters of elite families. In discussing the guidelines for womanly behaviour, *Nü xiaojing* echoed the *Liji* and indicated that: "When a woman goes out of the door, she must keep her face covered. She should walk at night only with a light; and

if she has no light, she should not stir. When seeing her brothers off, she should not trespass over the doorway (出門必掩蔽其面，夜行以燭，無燭則止。送兄弟不逾於閾."[28] A similar traditionalist tone can be found in *Cuishi furen*, which did not expound on guest etiquette but offered advice about *nei/wai* interactions: "When you meet people on the street, you must salute them submissively, retreating and not rushing ahead of your seniors and juniors. Do not bring home word from the outside and do not report to strangers what is spoken within the family (路上逢人須斂手， 尊卑迴避莫湯前， 外言莫向家中說， 家語莫向外人傳。)" (Zheng and Zhu 2002, 413). While keeping a clear dividing line between the internal and external realms, *Cuishi furen* and *Nü lunyu* offer an interesting glimpse into how social interactions were incorporated into Tang female education. In particular, the Song sisters' treatise mentions guest etiquette in three chapters: "*Xue li* 學禮 (Learning the ritual)", "*Xun nannü* 訓男女 (Instructing boys and girls)", and "*Dai ke* 待客 (Hosting guests)". These chapters provide an overview of proper rules for greeting, treating, and feeding guests in three specific roles: as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother.

While reminding girls that they "should stay within the family (當在家庭)", *Nü lunyu* seemingly implied that social interactions were a normal part of life during the Tang dynasty[29] and as such needed to be regulated by conduct norms. In "*Xue li*" the Song sisters provided advice on how daughters should behave as hosts and guests, with their duties only limited to welcoming visitors, engaging in conversation, and offering tea (Pang-White 2018, 88-90). However, looking after guests as wives or mothers was a totally different matter: everything became their responsibility, from the quality and composition of food, to the tidiness of utensils and behaviour of children, which demonstrated their ability to manage the household. Since the family reputation was at stake, the husband was also primarily involved in the role of host: "Serve guests tea and water. [Once this is done] withdraw to the back of the hall and listen for the husband's instructions. [If guests are staying,] discuss quietly with the husband whether to

[28] NXJ, 12.15–16. See also Legge 1967, 455.

[29] See, for instance, the opening of chapter 10: "Generally, every family will have guests visiting the hosts." (Pang-White 2018, 111).

kill a chicken or use millet for the meal" (Pang-White 2018, 112). Despite the subordinate role highlighted in this passage, women could also receive their husband's guests if he was not at home. A servant would first enquire about their name and origin and then the wife would receive them "if they ought to be met", offering tea and discussing the purpose of their visit before reporting to the husband (Pang-White 2018, 112).

Although the historical accuracy of these practices can hardly be confirmed, their inclusion in a widely-known text like the *Nü lunyu* is possibly a reflection of how the boundaries of the social sphere changed at the time. It is also plausible that it was a consequence of the Song sisters' writing purpose and intended readership, non-elite women, who unlike the sisters could not opt out of marriage. Perhaps it was thanks to their unique position as unmarried women from a declining aristocratic family with access to a career at court that they were able to adapt a seemingly static moral system to everyday practices. In particular, the recurring formula "Do not learn from those women (莫學他人)", and the related stigmatised behaviours, offer an interesting glimpse into the reality of family life. When it came to social interactions, for instance, *Nü lunyu* singled out the negative example of girls wandering around the village day and night, gossiping, getting drunk at friends' houses, bringing disgrace to their families, and inflicting shame upon themselves (Pang-White 2018, 88-90). Disorganised wives who were not able (or willing) to properly host guests were also sharply criticised, due to their lacking household management skills and the resulting embarrassment brought upon the husband and his visitors (Pang-White 2018, 111–113).

In conclusion, the particular stress on guest etiquette appears to be a unique feature of Tang female education, as it was not included in later canonical *nüxun* such as *Neixun* or *Nüfan jielu*. At the same time, it could also reflect a less rigid hierarchy in late Tang society and the more comprehensive, far-reaching nature of female education.

Conclusions

The three *nüxun* texts analysed above (*Nü xiaojing*, *Nü lunyu*, and *Cuishi furen*) are the product of different backgrounds and targeted a diverse readership. While explicitly drawing from Han conduct books, such as *Liji*, *Nü jie*, and *Lienü zhuan*, they also showcased time-specific trends, which reflected the socio-cultural environment of the time. Tang women were no longer depicted merely in the role of subservient wives, but also as filial daughters, with a particular emphasis on the relationship with their parents and on how their natal family prepared them for marriage and their future responsibilities. *Tang nüxun* texts also indicated parents-in-law to be the centre of the husband's family and consistently highlighted winning their affection as a new bride's primary duty, rather than just a route to her husband's heart. The marital bond was considered the foundation of the Five Human Relationships, but appeared more reciprocal than hierarchical, as depicted in the Han texts. Wives' devotion to their husbands was no longer based on the cosmological order between Heaven and Earth, but justified by sincere affection, since their relationship was predestined. Finally, while women's main sphere of agency was still the inner chambers, they were no longer precluded from social interaction, although they still needed to conform to strict guest-host etiquette.

In China, the history of women and family has always been deeply interconnected with the domestic realm (*nei*), where women's agency was realised through the management of the household, the fostering of harmonious relationships, and the education of children. However, as this study has demonstrated, family and education cannot be seen as entities detached from the socio-cultural context of the time, as they reflected innovation of a political, economic, and religious nature (Ebrey 2003, 12). In focusing on female education and on the inner chambers, this examination hoped to provide fresh perspectives on the fluidity of the *nei/wai* boundaries and on the power dynamics within late Tang families, quoting directly from women's voices.

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