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Women's Meekness Virtue in the *Book of Songs*

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Respected provost, Miss Deng and everybody, good morning and good afternoon. My name is Liu Siyu. Today I am very happy to present you the topic about Women's Meekness Virtue in the *Book of Songs*. This presentation will be divided into two parts. The first is to list three poems in the *Book of Songs* describing women's meekness virtue, plus self-reflection and explanation. The second is summary.

The "unrighteousness things" in the *Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences* include: "women are not gentle and obedience."¹ In the *Book of Changes*, women express the Kun hexagram, and also means obedience. Therefore, these two books proposed women's meekness virtue. Since ancient times, people have regarded women's meekness as beauty, but in modern times, many people have questioned this view. In the *Book of Songs*, many poems describe the virtue and appearance of women's meekness. I interested in it and take this opportunity to explore its deep meaning.

In the Odes of Shao And The South, there was a poem named He Bi Nong Yi which was about the King Ping of the Zhou dynasty married his granddaughter to prince of the state of Qi. This poem was selected in *The Governing Principle of Ancient China*, and its preface said: The whole poem praised the princess. Although she was a princess, she also married the prince of Qi. Her carriage and clothes had nothing to do with her husband's position, only second to the queen. Such a noble female can also adhere to women's way to achieve quiet and gentle virtue, and will not neglect others because of her noble status.

This is praising the princess's virtue. As mentioned in the poem: 'Are they not expressive of reverence and harmony, -The carriages of the king's daughter?'²

¹ Original text: '女不柔順。' *Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences* 太上感應篇, Collected in *Sheng Xue Gen Zhi Gen* 聖學根之根 • 第六冊, (Taipei: World Book Company, 2016), P.7. Trans. by myself.

² Trans. by James Legge, He Bi Nong Yi in the Lessons from the states of the *Book of Poetry* 詩經·國風·何彼穠矣 Original text: '曷不肅雍，王姬之車' Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃，<https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/odes-of-shao-and-the-south/zh?en=on> , 17 December 2021.

However, many scholars of later generations believe that this sentence "Are they not expressive of reverence and harmony" was ironic. For example, Pei Puxian said: "Just the sentence 'He Bu Su Yong' makes people feel that it has the meaning of ridicule. Because to be a person, the most taboo is arrogance. Not to mention a bride who was arrogant. The sentence slightly reveals the bride's arrogance."³ *The Collected Notes on The Governing Principle of Ancient China* included the *Maoshi Zhengyi* said : "This is poem praises the majesty and grace of the princess. How can it say that everything is not respectful, cautious and harmonious? That is to say that everything is very respectful and peaceful. When the princess first took a carriage, she was very respectful and peaceful. So later, when she came to the home of the state of Qi, she was still respectful and peaceful."⁴ Therefore, I agree with the annotation in the later.

Because in the period of King Ping of Zhou Dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty had begun to decline. In *the Historical Records of Zhou Benji*, it was said that during the period of King Ping, when the Zhou Dynasty declined, the powerful princes would annex the weak princes. The states of Qi, Chu, Qin and Jin began to grow, and politics were managed by the princes.⁵ It was recorded in the *Zuo's Biography of the Spring and Autumn Annals* that after the death of King Ping of Zhou in March, the exchange of son as hostages between the emperor of Zhou Dynasty and the princes of the state of Zheng in the summer. At that time, all the vassal states had huge ambition and wanted to expand their power.⁶ So I think, princess was married to the state of Qi, the big reason was to stabilize the state of Qi, that is, the "amity policy" which was better known later. However, the state of Qi was still a vassal state at that time, so it was called married beneath. This poem praised the princess's women's morality. I think the princess cannot keep women's morality without having a gentle character. Because the ancient princes' wives had high status that if they married abroad, they could not

³ Pei Puxian 裴普賢, *The Reader of the Commentary of the Book of Poetry* 詩經評註讀本(Taipei: Bookstore in Taipei City,2003),p.54.Trans. by myself.

⁴ *Maoshi Zhengyi* 毛詩正義, Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=871901&searchu=%E8%A9%A9%E7%BE%8E%E7%8E%8B%E5%A7%AC%E8%82%85%E9%9B%8D> , 17 December 2021.Trans. by myself.

⁵ Ma Chiying 馬持盈, *The Commentary of The Historical Records* 史記今注(Taipei: The Commercial Press, Ltd., 1999), p.132. Trans. by myself.

⁶ Shen Yucheng 沈玉成, *The Translation of the Zuo's Biography of the Spring and Autumn Annals* 左傳譯文(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), p.5.Trans. by myself.

return without great reason. Therefore, in the face of such political factors mixed in marriage, the princess should not only demean herself, but also never return to her mother country. Therefore, I think princess obedience to the arrangements of her grandfather and the state and her adherence to women's morality well highlights her meekness character. As myself, I might not be able to accept such an arrangement.

But women's meekness is not blind obedience to all arrangements. The poem Xing Lu, which is in the same chapter as the previous one, told the story of a man and a woman who have an engagement, but the man does not follow the proper etiquette to force the woman to marry, and the woman refuses. There are still many controversial points about the background of this poem. For example, the man's identity is vague. Does he get married or not? Is he had an agreement with this woman? These are debated by scholars of all dynasties. Here, I will focus on the women's deeds recorded in *the Biographies of Women*, which records why the woman refused the engagement. The woman told the matchmaker, "Couples are the beginning of the relationship between people, and there can be no deviation. The book said: 'Only by correcting its origin can we understand and manage things clearly and perfectly. If you make a small mistake at the root, there may be thousands of miles of mistakes at the end.' Therefore, when the righteousness root is be found, the Dao also will spring. Only if the source is well managed, then the tributaries will naturally be very clear. Marriage is a thing of carrying on the family line and inheriting the ancestral spirit. And continuing to offer sacrifices to our ancestors as descendants. Today, the man's family despises etiquette and violates the system. Things are not done right. It won't work, and I won't marry."⁷ Later, the man went to court to sue, but the woman always insisted on righteousness and would rather die than get married. The poem also describes the scene of the woman brave and eloquent defense and finally winning the lawsuit. Who can say the sparrow has no horn? How else could it bore through my house? Who can say that you did not get me betrothed? How else could you have urged on this trial? But though you have forced me to trial, Your

⁷ The Commentary and Translation of Biographies for Chaste Women 列女傳今注今譯(Taipei: The Commercial Press, Ltd., 1996),p.131-132.Trans. by myself.

ceremonies for betrothal were not sufficient. Who can say that the rat has no molar teeth? How else could it bore through my wall? Who can say that you did not get me betrothed? How else could you have urged on this trial? But though you have forced me to trial, I will still not follow you.⁸ *The Collected Notes on The Governing Principle of Ancient China* said: “That woman can defend herself with etiquette without being succumbed to power or threats. She bravely stated her aspirations and made this poem to refuse the man.”⁹ Therefore, although the image of this woman seems to have nothing to do with the virtue of meekness, I still believe that she also had the meekness virtue. The difference is that she was submissive to etiquette, not submissive to rude; Obey morality rather than power. Therefore, as women, we should not only be meekness, but also have ability to distinguish what we should obey.

In my heart, the women who can best represent the virtue of meekness are no more than those to be a motherly model of the nation. In the Chapter of Greater odes of the kingdom, a poem named Si Zhai, in addition to praising the virtue of King Wen, it also lists the virtues of the three mothers of the Zhou Dynasty. This poem describes the reason why King Wen was so benevolence and wise. But in the first sentence, it lists three mothers, “How pure and reverent Tai-ren was, the mother of King Wen; how chastity and meekness Zhou Jiang was, the female of the royal family; Tai-si inherited their excellent virtues and fame, and has many descendants.”¹⁰ These three mothers are the wives of Wang Ji, the King Tai and the King Wen, and this sentence showed that the King Wen can be so holy with the help of the three females. The first female was his mother Tairen who gave birth to him and educated him. The second female Taijiang was his grandmother, she protected him with her great virtues. The

⁸ Trans. by James Legge, Xing Lu in the Lessons from the states of the *Book of Poetry* 詩經·國風·行露 Original text: ‘誰謂雀無角、何以穿我屋。誰謂女無家、何以速我獄。雖速我獄、室家不足。誰謂鼠無牙、何以穿我墉。誰謂女無家、何以速我訟。雖速我訟、亦不女從。’ Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃, <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/odes-of-shao-and-the-south/zh?en=on> , 17 December 2021.

⁹ The Commentary and Translation of the Book of Songs 詩經評釋 (Taipei: Students Book Company, 2017), p.79. Trans. by myself.

¹⁰ Trans. by myself with reference to James Legge, Si Zhai 思齊 Original text: ‘思齊大任、文王之母、思媚周姜、京室之婦。大姒嗣徽音、則百斯男。’ Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃, <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/si-zhai/zh?en=on> , 17 December 2021.

third female, his virtuous wife Taisi was able to inherit the virtues of two previous mothers to help King Wen. In *the Biographies of Women*, there are records of the virtues of the three great mothers. Taijiang is single-minded, gentle and obedient without fault. During Tairen pregnant with King Wen, she did not look something evil, did not listen to lewd voices, and did not speak bad words. Taisi was able to learn from the experience of the first two mothers and help King Wen manage things in the palace. She gave birth to ten children, and they were all very excellent, including King Wu and Duke of Zhou who we are familiar with. I think the virtue of meekness is only the most basic virtue for them, and other great virtues should be based on this basic virtue. If the mother does not have the character and virtue of meekness, she cannot cultivate her child as a sage.

In addition to these three poems, there are many poems describing women's obedience and virtue in the *Book of Songs*, which are not listed one by one due to the relationship of time. To sum up, from He Bi Nong Yi, the princess took the lead in setting an example, adhered to women's morality, and married the prince of the state of Qi under the arrangement of the king; In Xing Lu, woman scrupulously abide by etiquette and are powerful and unyielding for their obedience to the correct moral etiquette; Finally, Si Zhai listed the virtues of three mothers in the Zhou dynasty. They have changed meekness into a habit and character engraved in their bones, which is also the basis for the manifestation of other virtues.

I saw a sentence on the Internet before. If there are 1000 ways to hit you in life, you should have 10000 ways to fight back. But if a meek person faces 1000 ways of hitting in life, he can still repay it with a calm smile. Because there is no conflict with anyone and things in his heart, he can be meek to face the character of all things, which is a real strength in his heart. As Tagore said, "The world has kissed my soul with its pain, asking for its returning songs."¹¹ Laozi also said, "Meekness could conquer strength"¹². In fact, meekness is a kind of wisdom. When we can begin to

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*, 360 Library
http://www.360doc.com/content/11/0609/11/5133036_122637285.shtml, 17 December 2021.

¹² Shi Deqing 釋德清, *The Daodejing and Its Annotation by Shi Deqing 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2019), p.84.

understand this wisdom, life will become different.

That is all for my presentation, thank you for listening.

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