

The “Other” in Comparative Historiography: Female Disempowerment in Multitextual Analysis

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Abstract:

In recent years, as women’s voices have become increasingly prominent in contemporary society, feminist research has gained prominence. This study primarily employs Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of the “Other” as its core framework. Through a comparative reading of multiple texts, including *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Book of Han*, and *Commentary of Zuo*, this analysis delves into how the Han dynasty’s establishment of “Exclusive Reverence for Confucianism” and the “Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues” theory imposed subordinate value norms upon women. Current scholarly research on female figures in *the Records of the Grand Historian* largely remains confined to traditional literary and historical analysis, lacking deep integration with modern gender theory. This study aims to fill this gap. The findings demonstrate that although Sima Qian adhered to the principle of factual recording, his narrative strategies, material selection, and value judgments were profoundly influenced by orthodox Confucian values. By framing women’s deeds within patriarchal evaluative frameworks such as chastity, righteousness, and “femme fatale” tropes, he systematically undermined women’s historical agency, constructing them as “Other” objects meant to highlight male virtue. This study concludes that *Records of the Grand Historian*’s narrative model is a paradigmatic official history. It not only reflects the transformation of gender concepts during the Han dynasty but also participated in and reinforced the institutionalization of women’s status as the “Other” in subsequent eras, providing a model for understanding the relationship between historical writing and power construction.

Keywords: records of the grand historian; Simone de Beauvoir; the other; feminism.

1. Introduction

The victors write history, and the pen of men often defines gender order. The Han dynasty's ideology of "Exclusive Reverence for Confucianism" and the "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues" theory established new value norms for women. As the author of *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian was deeply influenced by orthodox thought. Even within the context where Han women still enjoyed some degree of freedom, Sima Qian, while acknowledging women possessed specific talents, measured their social value against the standards of a patriarchal society. In historical narratives, women lost their agency, appearing primarily as appendages to the patriarchal order. Their virtues—chastity, loyalty, and steadfastness—illuminated male loyalty and righteousness, thereby accelerating the process of "othering" women.

Currently, while there has been some research on female figures from the Pre-Qin and Han periods both domestically and internationally—such as Paul R. Goldin's *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* and Wang Zijin's *Female Industrial and Commercial Owners* in the Qin and Han Dynasties, both of which examine women from this era [1-2]. However, existing research largely remains within traditional historical and literary analytical frameworks, focusing on women's tragic experiences and living conditions, with limited integration of modern gender theories. For instance, the contributions of feminist scholars like Simone de Beauvoir have seen few developments in the field of female representation and lack sufficient depth. Therefore, this study is important for domestic and international research on female figures in *the Records of the Grand Historian*. It examines how Sima Qian portrays women and delves deeply into why he chose to write about them in such a manner.

This study will draw upon Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" and employ comparative readings of multiple texts, including *the Records of the Grand Historian* and *the Book of Han*, to interpret the gradual silencing of women within the social and historical context of Han Dynasty China under the dominant Confucian ideology. This study will examine women's social environment and historical records from the Pre-Qin period to the Qin and Han dynasties through a review of classical texts. Analysing the similarities and differences in female representations and narratives across these texts will elucidate the historical context shaped by the establishment of mainstream Confucian thought. It will further dissect how men constructed women as objects within society by controlling the authority of historical writing, thereby revealing the complexity of Sima Qian's intellectual framework.

2. The Social Context of Women's Lives in the Qin and Han Dynasties

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir forcefully refuted the biological determinism that posits "women are inherently inferior." She argued that "one is not born, but becomes, a woman," asserting that women's status as the Other stems from the combined effects of historical, social, and economic factors—not biological destiny [3]. As China's dominant ideology, Confucianism has fundamentally shaped women's social position within Chinese culture.

In fact, noblewomen still wielded considerable influence in political spheres during the pre-Qin period—particularly the Spring and Autumn period—when Confucian rituals and laws had not yet thoroughly permeated society. For instance, *the Commentary of Zuo* records how Cheng Feng, mother of Duke Xi of Lu, advised her son to treat the ruler of Xugu with courtesy, while Ding Jiang, wife of Duke Ding of Wei, participated in state affairs and urged her husband to honour Sun Linfu [4]. Beyond these instances, societal constraints on women were relatively lax. In *the Book of Songs: Zai Chi*, Lady Xu Mu, seeking to rescue her homeland from peril, devised a plan to appeal for aid from other great states. Though the people of Xu disapproved of her actions, she disregarded the constraints of propriety and law, travelling far and wide to plead for help [5]. This reflects that society at the time still maintained a certain degree of tolerance toward women, who had not yet been entirely confined within the rigid framework of ethical doctrines.

During the Han Dynasty, when Confucianism was initially established as the orthodox ideology, Emperor Wu of Han adopted Dong Zhongshu's "Suppressing all other schools of thought and espousing Confucianism as the orthodox state ideology," aiming to develop an ideological and ethical system suited to creating a centralised state. This served the needs of the newly founded dynasty for stable development and unified governance. In her book *The Evolution of Concepts of Femininity*, Du Fangqin details how Yijing studies—one of Confucianism's foundational sources—established patriarchal norms through the theory of Heavenly and Earthly Yin and Yang [6]. Building upon this framework, Dong Zhongshu systematically proposed the theory of the "Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues": "The ruler is the cardinal principle for ministers, the father for sons, and the husband for wives," alongside "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and integrity." Among these, "the husband is the principle for the wife" explicitly placed women in a subordinate position to men, thereby imposing strict social and domestic roles upon them and profoundly shaping the gender order

for nearly two millennia thereafter.

As Grand Historian, Sima Qian's historical writing could not be divorced from this grand ideological context. In Ming Juan's research, *the Records of the Grand Historian* mentions only 238 women, representing an extremely low proportion [7]. Yet women in the Han Dynasty still enjoyed a degree of freedom. For instance, female entrepreneurship and commercial success were commonplace. Bamboo slips unearthed from the Han Dynasty tomb at Mocuzi in Wuwei, Gansu, explicitly state in the *Imperial Edict on the Staff of Authority*: "Women aged sixty or above without sons shall be recognised as widows. Their commercial transactions in the marketplace shall be exempt from taxes." [8]. This reflects societal approval for older women engaging in commerce. During this pivotal ideological transformation and social change period, *the Records of the Grand Historian* inevitably reflected Sima Qian's objectivity and biases. On one hand, upholding the historian's duty to record truthfully, Sima Qian objectively documented the deeds of numerous women throughout history, such as Empress Lü, featured in the Basic Annals. On the other hand, Confucian orthodox values profoundly shaped his evaluative framework, selection of materials, and narrative focus. Consciously or unconsciously, he participated in constructing women as "others" conforming to the demands of his era.

Sima Qian's portrayal of women in *the Records of the Grand Historian* reflects, to a certain extent, the "othering" mechanism identified in Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory—where men, wielding discursive power, construct women as objects subordinate to the subject position. By monopolising discourse, men absolutise their own perspectives, thereby establishing women's status as "the Other." In the second part of the historical section within the first volume of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir meticulously traces how men systematically deprived women of economic independence and political rights through the emergence of private property, shifts in social division of labor, and the enactment of state laws—such as Roman law and the Napoleonic Code—thereby consolidating their own subject status while relegating women to the marginal position of "the Other." In patriarchal societies, men are subjects while women are objects—the social Other. Through selective historiography in works like *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian subjected women's normal social activities to Confucian moral judgments of the Three Bonds and Five Constants, continually erasing female existence. Simultaneously, this ideology was reproduced through culture, religion, law, and education, causing both genders to internalize the notion that "men are subjects, and women as the Other," institutionalizing it and ultimately resulting in what Carl Jung termed the

collective unconscious, which perpetuates gender tragedy [3].

3. Analyzing the "Other" Fate of Women Through the Portrayal of Figures Like Empress Lü

Empress Lü is one of the most representative female figures in *the Records of the Grand Historian*. Sima Qian placed her within the Basic Annals, a section dedicated to imperial biographies, composing *the Basic Annals of Empress Lü*. Sima Qian did not entirely dismiss Lü Hou's historical achievements due to her gender. This formally acknowledged her status as the de facto supreme ruler and reflected the historian's commitment to factual recording. However, while Sima Qian acknowledged Empress Lü's political standing, his account remains steeped in patriarchal prejudice toward female rulers. *The Basic Annals of Empress Lü* concludes with a few words: "Government affairs never left her chambers, yet the realm remained tranquil. Punishments were seldom imposed, and criminals were few. The people devoted themselves to farming, and clothing and food increased abundantly. "[9]. This positive assessment of Lü Zhi is contrasted with the bulk of the text, which details her ruthlessness and selfishness—such as the brutal mutilation of Consort Qi into a "human pig," the poisoning of Prince Youyi of Zhao, and her scheming for the private gain of her Lü clan offspring. *The Records of the Grand Historian* deliberately frames Empress Lü's political actions through the lens of gendered prejudice—portraying her as a woman who "abused her power for personal gain"—and strives to construct an image of a "poisonous woman" and "usurper."

In contrast, Ban Gu's *Book of Han* dedicates an entire chapter, *Annals of Empress Lü*, to objectively documenting the significant edicts and major events during her eight-year reign. This allows us to move beyond a single perspective and better understand Empress Lü's character [10]. The selective portrayal of Empress Lü in *the Records of the Grand Historian* reflects the limitations imposed by Sima Qian's Confucian-influenced perspective on female characterisation. As Simone de Beauvoir extensively analysed in *The Second Sex*, myths, literature, and history often demonise female power to intimidate other women into accepting predetermined destinies and avoiding transgression [3]. Similarly, *the Records of the Grand Historian*'s portrayal of Lü Hou's villainous image primarily provided posterity with a cautionary example of a "hen crowing at dawn"—a negative archetype serving as a warning and disciplinary model.

Beyond this, it is particularly noteworthy that Empress Lü

encountered fierce opposition when attempting to enfeoff members of the Lü clan as kings. Empress Lü exercised imperial authority, and as a blood-related maternal relative, it was considered natural for Liu Bang's brothers and nephews to be enfeoffed as kings. Yet, despite her brothers having sacrificed their lives for the state and the Lü clan having rendered meritorious service to the nation in the early period, her efforts to elevate her maternal clan's status were portrayed as "usurping power" and maternal relatives interfering in state affairs, drawing opposition from many court officials at the time. No matter how successfully Empress Lü played the role of "emperor," her biological sex forever defined her as an outsider to the power structure. Any action she took to benefit herself or her group was easily interpreted as a threat to the male hereditary order and an act of subversion. Her agency could never be honestly acknowledged, and she was ultimately nailed to the pillar of historical shame, serving as a cautionary symbol of the "other."

Beyond Empress Lü, the portrayal of other women in *the Records of the Grand Historian* similarly permeates with a narrative strategy of othering. *the Records of the Grand Historian* often define women's worth through their dependence on men. In the "Biographies of Assassins," Nie Rong, after her brother Nie Zheng's death, disregarded her own life to go to the marketplace, embrace his corpse, and weep bitterly, ultimately dying beside him. In Sima Qian's narrative, her fierce actions primarily highlight Nie Zheng's reputation for righteousness [9].

Beyond this, in *the Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of the Wealthy*: the widow Qing of Ba is portrayed as a successful entrepreneur who amassed wealth rivalling that of a state through her talents in managing cinnabar mining operations. However, when Sima Qian assessed her value, he emphasised not her business acumen or managerial wisdom, but rather that "her wealth enabled her to defend herself against encroachment. The First Emperor of Qin regarded her as a virtuous woman and honoured her as a guest, constructing the Nühuaiqing Terrace for her." Her personal abilities ultimately reached their zenith in the recognition of the First Emperor of Qin, who honoured her as a virtuous woman. Her success was skillfully framed within the moral framework of "chastity," which served male interests, while her commercial agency was similarly downplayed [9]. Moreover, *the Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of the Zhou Dynasty* portrays Baosi's smile as the downfall of the Zhou dynasty, attributing the failure of a patriarchal society to women and positioning them as appendages to men. This narrative similarly reflects women's status as "the other" within a male-dominated society. Whether it be the empress Lü, the concubine Baosi, or ordinary women like Nie Rong

and the Widow Qing of Ba, their personal value realisation depended on the patriarchal value evaluation system, and the downfall of a state required women to bear the blame [9].

4. The Records of the Grand Historian's Shaping and Influence on the Institutionalization of Female Norms

As the quintessential model of official history, *the Records of the Grand Historian* is a product of its era's ideology and a significant contributor to shaping subsequent perceptions of women. The "othering" gender discourse it helped construct was continuously reproduced through later historical texts, didactic literature, and educational systems, ultimately achieving full institutionalisation.

The Records of the Grand Historian's writing style and value orientation were emulated by subsequent official documents and literary works, such as Ban Gu's *Book of Han* and Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women*. The criteria for selecting exemplary women increasingly emphasised chastity, fidelity, and martyrdom, significantly diminishing women's roles as historical agents. They became more moral symbols, embellishing imperial authority and illustrating moral education. *The Biographies of Exemplary Women* recounts the story of Gai Jiang's wife, who refused to remarry after her husband's death and chose suicide instead, providing a model of chastity and loyalty for women in society. The seven chapters of *the Admonitions for Women* systematically constructed moral archetypes for women, warning court ladies to uphold the virtues of consorts and empresses. They theorised and concretised the principles of "the husband as the head of the wife" and the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," thoroughly establishing the behavioural code for women as subordinate "others." This transformed Confucian views on women from implicit narratives in historical texts into explicit disciplinary manuals.

Simultaneously, interpretations of classical texts reinforced the disciplinary process of establishing societal standards for women. The Preface to the *Mao Tradition of the Book of Songs* reinterpreted the pursuit of love in *Guan Ju* as a celebration of "the virtues of the queen consort"—delighting in virtuous women to match noble gentlemen, concerned with promoting the capable, not indulging in sensuality—aimed at praising the queen consort's lack of jealousy and her role in assisting the sovereign [11]. This interpretation completely erases the emotional subjectivity of the poem, successfully transforming it into a political-moral textbook advocating how women should fulfil their role as "the other."

Notably, women's status as the "other" in society is not only reflected in the male-dominated writing of official histories but also internalised within the narratives of later generations of women. For instance, *the Four Books for Women*—a classic text for female education popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties—was compiled in contrast to Zhu Xi's *Four Books*, the designated texts for imperial examinations. The Four Books for Women included works such as *Short Records of Models for Women*, *the Admonitions for Women*, *Women's Analects*, and *Instructions for the Inner Quarters*, though authored by women, consciously perpetuated and promoted ethical principles centred on male supremacy and female subordination. These texts championed the tenets of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the "Three Bonds and Five Constants." The traditional gender order was not only constructed through external norms but had also permeated women's self-perception and discursive practices, thereby participating in the reproduction of their subordinate "otherness."

By this point, through the historicization of accounts in works like *the Records of the Grand Historian*, the theorisation of *the Admonitions for Women*, and the canonisation of classical interpretations, a comprehensive discourse system establishing women's status as the "other" had been fully established. The ideal feminine archetype championed during the Han Dynasty was no longer the patriotic figure like Lady Xu Mu or the political strategist like Empress Lü, but rather an internalized, auxiliary, selfless "other"—a supportive consort embodying "the virtues of a queen," a chaste and loyal woman sacrificing for her family, and a virtuous wife and mother adhering to the "Three Obediences and Four Constants." In the second part of Volume II of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir meticulously analyses the "otherness" condition where only married women bearing children could attain dignity. This mirrors how the Records of the Grand Historian and subsequent texts subordinated women's worth to male success, evaluating their lives solely by their childbearing and chastity. Women's independent value is utterly negated; they exist as the Other in patriarchal society, their purpose exclusively defined by service to the patriarchal family and state [3].

In reality, the period when women faced truly stringent social discipline coincided with the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty. This development continued the Han Dynasty's tradition of centralised authority and the need to regulate the populace. It elevated the threshold for female chastity through Cheng Yi's notion that „starving to death is a minor matter, but losing one's virtue is a grave offence.“ The marginalisation of women within patriarchal society and their transformation into

„the other“ was a protracted, phased process.

5. Conclusion

This study employs Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" as its analytical framework. Through textual analysis of multiple historical accounts depicting female figures such as Empress Lü, the Widow Qing of Ba, and Nie Rong during the Qin and Han dynasties, it systematically reveals how Sima Qian, within the context of the establishment of Han Confucian ideology, participated in constructing and solidifying women's "Other" status through historical writing, and the impact this had on subsequent perceptions of women's status. Findings reveal that while Sima Qian adhered to the principle of factual recording and objectively documented women's political and economic activities, his narrative strategies, selection of materials, and value judgments were profoundly constrained by contemporary mainstream ideology. He intentionally or unintentionally incorporated women into a patriarchal moral evaluation system. On one hand, he acknowledged women's talents and contributions; on the other, he narrowed their value to serving as a foil to male virtue or exemplifying chastity ethics. This diminished women's historical agency and accelerated their "othering" process. This mode of writing not only reflects the contradictions in gender concepts during the Han Dynasty's period of ideological transformation but also profoundly influenced subsequent generations. As the paradigm of official history, the narrative patterns concerning women in *the Records of the Grand Historian* were inherited and developed by Ban Gu's *Book of Han*, Liu Xiang's *The Biographies of Exemplary Women*, and even Ban Zhao's *the Admonitions for Women*. This narrative pattern persisted in official histories penned by men and became internalised within later female self-discipline manuals like *the Four Books for Women*. Gradually, women were transformed from historical agents into moral symbols, ultimately completing the transition from implicit narrative to explicit discipline. This process profoundly embodies Simone de Beauvoir's assertion: one is not born, but becomes.

The significance of this study lies in addressing the deficiency of modern feminist theoretical perspectives in existing overseas research on female representations during the Qin and Han periods. It also provides theoretical grounding for understanding the biased portrayal of women in traditional historical writing. However, the scope of textual analysis remains limited, presenting certain constraints. Future research may extend to comparative studies of female representations in other historical or literary texts. It could also integrate archaeological materials and folk documents to reconstruct women's voices obscured

by official histories, thereby achieving a more comprehensive grasp of the complexities within the ancient Chinese gender order.

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