

Way Ideals and Women as Household Bursars

management contains the implication that the household was a realm of material concerns and mundane desires that was beneath the true calling of a man. It was best for women to take over the daily concerns of household survival so men could be liberated from the limits these placed on their moral and scholarly development.

The important role of the wife in maintaining the family economy made Chu Hsi and his followers especially concerned about the remarriage of widows. When a man died, his widow was left alone to save the household from disaster. At this juncture, her financial management was vital. She was also left to educate her sons and establish the next generation. Her labor and authority were needed to perpetuate the sacred patrilineal line. Furthermore, a widow had to continue to serve her mother- and father-in-law and carry on sacrifices to the dead. The emphasis in Ch'eng-Chu philosophy on the loyalty of widows had both a material and religious dimension. Remarriage seriously damaged a household by virtue of losing the wife's labor, financial management, and dowry property. Moreover, it upset family relations, destroyed filial piety, and threatened the very existence of the patriline.

Chu Hsi's Contemporaries and Followers

Chu Hsi was not alone in telling of detailed financial management by the women he eulogized. His contemporaries and followers wrote similar anecdotes into their inscriptions for women, some even fuller and more dramatic than Chu's. As with Chu Hsi, themes integral to the larger Confucian agenda appear with great frequency. Frugality was an essential quality for anyone deserving a funerary inscription, and women were nearly always praised for helping educate their sons. Serving one's mother- and father-in-law was universally stressed. These issues will come up in the passages I discuss below, but my sharper focus will be on explicit discussions of the management of money.

Many of the same authors who praised wives for forfeiting their dowries also commended them for skilled financial management to preserve the estate of their husband's family. We saw above how Han Yüan-chi (1118-1187) praised women for their dowry donations. These same women are described by Han as having considerable control over resources in the household. Lady Shang-kuan (1094-1178) entered her husband's family after the death of his parents. Han writes, "she would take stock of the possessions of the household and always prepare [the sacrifices] nobly."¹¹⁶ As mentioned previously, she purchased tomb lands

116 *Nan-chien chia-i kao*, 22:22a (SKCS chen-pen, 22:25a).

for her parents-in-law and built a cloister on them. After the death of her own parents, she built a large house in the prefectural capital of Shao-wu for relatives in her natal family, whom she collected together to live there. Another woman, née Mao, was widowed at twenty-seven and left with seven children – three born to her and four born to the first wife.¹¹⁷ Han writes: “She remained chaste and no one could dissuade her. She herself managed the lands and buildings in order to preserve the [family] livelihood.”¹¹⁸ Her sons and grandsons subsequently passed the civil service examinations and reached office. Recall that Madam Mao sold her hairpins and earrings to pay for sacrifices to her husband. A wife was to combine her own assets with those of the house, not just manage other people’s money. (Han’s separate mention of the dowry contribution, however, shows that it was still unusual and worthy of special praise.)

Han Yüan-chi joined Chu Hsi in promoting the image of wives securing financial security for the family while men remained in the dark about daily operations. One example is Madam Li (1104–1177), whose second marriage was to a cousin of Han’s father Han Ch’iu (d. 1150), a dedicated official. Han writes:

Her husband had a famous reputation both in the capital and out in the prefectures. He devoted himself to affairs of office and never asked about the resources of the household. Madam Li said, “Managing the household is my occupation.” She took what she’d accumulated [from household funds] as well as her own personal dowry property, and used these to buy good land and build a house in Lin-ch’uan, fulfilling the family’s intention of establishing a residence there.

One day someone came carrying a sack of rice to deliver to the house. Her husband was surprised and asked her about it. She laughed and said, “This is rent for our household.” He thereupon thanked her for being a true help to the family.

Han goes on to say:

Madam Li was skilled at managing the family. She had rules for governing all household matters, large or small. With money and grain she knew when to economize. She relieved relatives, both agnates and affines, according to their needs and relation to the family.¹¹⁹

117 *Nan-chien chia-i kao*, 22:30b (SKCS chen-pen, 22:34b). She had four stepchildren from the previous wife, two sons and two daughters, and two sons and a daughter of her own. (The SKCS chen-pen edition mistakenly writes that the first wife had “two sons” instead of “sons and daughters two each.”)

118 *Nan-chien chia-i kao*, 22:31a (SKCS chen-pen, 22:34b).

119 *Nan-chien chia-i kao*, 22:25a–28a. See also, Ebrey, *Inner Quarters*, 118. It is interesting that Han Yüan-chi tells us that Madam Li was previously married. He names her first husband, Ch’ien Tuan-i, an official, and tells of the marriage of Madam Li’s daughter fathered by this man.

Madam Li managed the entire estate herself, collecting rents and handling expenditures. Her multifarious activities included distributing relief to poor relatives and buying and selling land. When her husband died, she bought land for his grave and set up a cloister with three monks to do services for him and his previously deceased mother.¹²⁰

The great Learning of the Way scholar and Chu Hsi collaborator, Lü Tsu-ch'ien (1137–1181), who was also Han Yüan-chi's son-in-law, adopted the same themes in his funerary inscriptions for women. A Madam P'an managed the family according to rules and ritual, serving her blind mother-in-law and aggressively encouraging her sons to study. An impoverished widow née Chou raised her four young sons on only a few dozen *mou* of land and managed to send them to school, never letting them worry about food or fuel.¹²¹ Others helped their husbands, one never tiring of household management even after turning grey.¹²²

In keeping with the motif that a woman's efforts released men from household burdens, Lü Tsu-ch'ien quotes a letter from a friend telling how his wife had handled every kind of domestic affair: "I never once asked her about any of it. When I was hungry, I had food to eat; when I was cold, I had clothes to wear; when guests came, I could serve them food and wine. . . . From the time my wife came, I stood by with my hands in my sleeves and only commented when there were problems with the household supervision." When his wife died, he told Lü, he had to retire to tend to the household. Only then did he realize how hard the job was, and he thought of how his wife had toiled at it on his behalf for forty years.¹²³ Another woman took over household management when her father-in-law died and her mother-in-law was old. Whenever she spoke to her husband she would say, "While father-in-law was still well, how were eminent guests hosted, how were the children educated? You take care of outside affairs and I will handle the inside. We mustn't let anything be diminished from how it was before."¹²⁴ Lü Tsu-ch'ien himself married three times, as each of his wives died young.¹²⁵ His repeated remarriages may reflect the importance he

120 *Nan-chien chia-i kao*, 15:10b ff; 22:25a–28a. 121 *Lü Tung-lai chi*, 7:161, 7:175–6.

122 *Lü Tung-lai chi*, 7:180, 8:198. 123 *Lü Tung-lai chi*, 7:167–8.

124 *Lü Tung-lai chi*, 8: 200–201. Recall that this same woman, née Ch'en, used her dowry "worth several hundred thousand [cash]" to buy books for her sons.

125 *Lü Tung-lai chi*, 7:166–7, 8:193. See also discussion in Tillman, *Confucian Discourse*, 90. Lü was married to two daughters of Han Yüan-chi and to a daughter of Jui Yeh (1114–1172). Both fathers were prominent officials from outside his home area. By Western counting, Lü enjoyed only eight years of matrimony between his three wives.

placed on having a principal wife around to act as the female head of household.

Later followers of Chu Hsi carried on the same tradition of encomiastic discourse. The inscriptions of Wei Liao-weng (1178–1237) provide an example. One woman he eulogized took care of the household while her husband was away studying, keeping up his prohibition on family members accumulating private property.¹²⁶ More impressive are his descriptions of women who were widowed. Madam Chiang (1169–1235) was the wife of Chu Hsi's student Li Hsiu-chi (fl. late twelfth century), but was widowed with young children. Through difficult times she raised her own children and those from a first marriage and educated them together with nephews. Wei tells us that when a famine struck in 1229–1230, she ordered the servants to calculate the number of people in the village, and then she sold grain to them at the same price as harvest time, even while the price had more than doubled in neighboring areas. Into old age, she personally supervised every aspect of the household.¹²⁷

Wei Liao-weng's grandmother, Madam Kao, similarly carried out famine relief. While her husband was alive, she lent grain to farmers and helped bereaved villagers. Her greatest challenge came after she was widowed at 51, when famine and unrest struck her home of P'u-chiang, in Szechwan. Wei writes:

In the Spring of 1171 there was a famine. The price of grain rose to 12,000 [cash] per picul. The bodies of the starving lay everywhere, and fighting broke out between the government and the common people. My grandmother fearlessly called together her sons and told them, "People have become desperate. We are fortunate to have food and clothing to last us. How can we bear to sit by watching day and night and not pity these people?" Thereupon she opened the storehouses and gave out the grain. Those who received it came in throngs with their children strapped to their backs. Thus she saved many lives and prevented people from joining the unrest.¹²⁸

As Wei Liao-weng describes to us, managing the household meant preserving the family estate against all kinds of threats, by confronting the dangers of society at that time. The boundary of the "household" was indeed a concept that varied with context. Wei speaks of his grandmother as "closing the door" and living in seclusion after she was widowed, but her seclusion did not prevent her from being a major force in the family and community, with control of substantial resources. Three of Wei's eleven inscriptions are written for women who were second principal wives, married after the death of the first wife. This

126 *Ho-shan chi*, 81:8a–b. 127 *Ho-shan chi*, 87:12a–14b. 128 *Ho-shan chi*, 88:1a–b.

may indicate again how important a wife was in the household. Widows were not to remarry, but widowers were almost required to.

The image created in these inscriptions is one of an authoritative female head of household who managed the finances of even large estates and protected the family from society's dangers. This was coupled with the model of these same wives sacrificing their own personal property and contributing it to these estates, thereby forfeiting the financial independence that their dowries provided them within the family.

A tension existed between the activist role of the female head of household and the subservient role assigned to women by Confucian doctrine in general and the Learning of the Way in particular. This tension did not go unnoticed by Learning of the Way thinkers themselves. Some revealing comments are provided by one of the foremost Learning of the Way interpreters after Chu Hsi, Chen Te-hsiu (1178–1235).

Chen Te-hsiu was from Chien-ning, the home prefecture of Chu Hsi. His precocious talent for learning launched him into an official career early in life (he passed his *chin-shih* at age 21). He gave distinguished service at court and, when periodically out of favor, in his home province of Fukien. Though he was not a direct disciple of Chu Hsi, Chen was recognized in his time as the foremost successor to Chu. He was active in getting the ban on the Ch'eng-Chu school lifted, and he worked tirelessly to promote Chu Hsi's philosophy in the prefectures and at court. Like Chu Hsi, he held the position of "lecturer from the classics mat" and instructed the emperor on the *Great Learning* (*Ta-hsüeh*) in which he "took up where Chu had left off."¹²⁹

During his productive career as a scholar, teacher, and official, Chen Te-hsiu wrote only two funerary inscriptions for women, both toward the end of his life.¹³⁰ Both are long and detailed, and he praises both women for contributing their dowries. Chen's second inscription portrays a woman who comes to wield considerable power in the household and community. Chen did not know the woman personally; he claims to have agreed to write her inscription only after being impressed by the biographical essay (*hsing-chuang*) written for her by his older colleague Liu

129 de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, 86. For more on Chen, see *Sung shih* 437:12957–64; SYHA 81:2695; and Julia Ching, "Chen Te-hsiu," in *Sung Biographies*, ed. Herbert Franke, I, 88. His biographical essay (*hsing-chuang*) was written by fellow Fukienese Liu K'o-chuang; *Hou-ts'un chi*, 168:1a–4ob. For the content and significance of his work, see *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, esp. 83–91, 98–126; and Chu Ron-guey, "Chen Te-hsiu and the Classic on Governance," (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1988).

130 *Hsi-shan chi*, 45:15a–16b and 45:27a–31b.

Tsai (1166–1239).¹³¹ Liu's essay is extant and provides a valuable comparison.¹³² Chen's comments are all the more interesting when we consider that he is creating her image from secondhand accounts. We can see what he chose to include from Liu Tsai's biography (and how he rewords direct quotations), and how he shaped his additional commentary.

Chen's subject, née Ts'ai (1154–1223), became the second wife of Wang Wan-shu (1143–1205) at the age of twenty-six, after the death of his first wife the previous year. Her husband's parents had already passed away at the time, and Madam Ts'ai came to be the powerhouse of a large family, especially after her husband died in 1205. She took in poor, orphaned, and widowed relatives of all ages. She raised and educated her sons and nephews, paying for teachers, presiding over cappings, and arranging marriages. She provided dowries for girls in the family (using her personal funds for her stepdaughter), and even outfitted with dowry a government sing-song girl originally from an official family who had fallen into servitude, so the girl could marry back into an established household. Madam Ts'ai's efforts extended to combatting heterodox cults in the local community and exposing a charlatan midwife who practiced questionable magic.¹³³

Before concluding the prose section of the inscription, Chen Te-hsiu felt compelled to comment on the contradiction between Madam Ts'ai's tough-minded initiative (as described by Liu Tsai) and the classical virtues of submission and obedience that were emphasized in Confucian doctrine:

The *Book of Changes (I-ching)* takes the female principle (*k'un*) as the way of a woman, [but] people are only aware of yielding (*jou*) and obedience (*shun*) and that is all. Previous Confucians elaborated on this, saying, "If a woman is not resolute (*chien*), she will not be able to complement (*p'ei*) the male principle

131 The woman's son requested the inscription during Chen's second period of impeachment in Ch'üan-chou, before he was recalled to the capital in 1232; *Hsi-shan chi*, 45:27a. Biographical essays were detailed accounts of a person's life usually written soon after death by someone who had been close to the deceased. For men, these usually narrated one's official career, but they were common for women as well, providing in both cases a record from which the more public funerary inscription could be written later.

132 *Man-t'ang chi*, 34:13b–21a.

133 *Hsi-shan chi*, 45:27a–31b. See also *Man-t'ang chi*, 34:13b–21a; 28:1a–5a. Chen Te-hsiu mistakenly gives the husband's surname as Liu. Madam Ts'ai's grandfather was the younger brother of the great Northern Sung statesman and calligrapher Ts'ai Hsiang (1012–1067) from Fukien. Her father died in office in Kwangtung when she was six. Her husband, Wang Wan-shu, came from a family of officials, and by virtue of his father obtained a number of local offices. His highest assignment was prefect of Chi-chou (Kiangsi), but he died before taking up the post; *Man-t'ang chi*, 28:1a–4b. See also Ch'ang Pi-te et al., *Sung-jen chuan-chi tzu-liao so-yin* I, 356.

Huang Kan's Enforcement of Way Ideals

(*ch'ien*).” Therefore even though the worthy women of old took complaisance, yielding, purity, and kindness (*wan, i, shu, hui*) as fundamental, when it came to their accomplishments, there are some things that even heroic men cannot do. Who can have done these without strength (*kang*) and intelligence (*ming*)? Can one say that women like Madam Ts'ai are not strong and intelligent?¹³⁴

Chen had to explain how women could fit into the classical Confucian model and still take on the challenging roles that he and others of his day endorsed. Chen wanted to temper exhortations of obedience with a call for women to act with courage and strength. In the verse section of the inscription (the *ming*), Chen again juxtaposes terms associated typically with women (obedience, submission, *jou, shun*) with those one might use to describe men (strength and intelligence *kang, ming*):

Use obedience and submission to establish the foundation, use strength and intelligence when extending to action. Only then will a woman's virtue be complete.¹³⁵

Chen found it necessary to explain the apparent contradiction between submission and initiative seen in the life of Madam Ts'ai and others of her kind. Submission to husbands and fathers-in-law was essential, but within their assigned sphere, aggressive and unyielding behavior by women was admired. A woman's relation to property according to Learning of the Way ideals reflected this contradiction. Wives were called on to relinquish their personal assets and thereby lose independence and insurance against mistreatment, but at the same time they were entreated to take on powerful managerial roles that left them mistresses of considerable family assets.

Huang Kan's Enforcement of Learning of the Way Ideals

Chu Hsi and his followers promoted a model of womanly virtue that included a wife's combining her personal property with the communal estate of her marital family and applying herself to enhance that estate. Yet the evidence suggests that Chu Hsi and others still took for granted certain features of Sung law and custom that kept a woman financially separate from her husband's household. For instance, Chu assumed that women had private property and that not all wives, even among his exemplary subjects, would give up their property. In some contexts he also took remarriage for granted or tolerated it as a necessary expedient. In a funerary inscription for one woman, he mentions quite matter-of-factly that she married twice, and he includes in his great anthology

134 *Hsi-shan chi*, 45:30b. 135 *Hsi-shan chi*, 45:31a.

Reflections on Things at Hand a funerary inscription by Ch'eng I where Ch'eng praises his father for arranging the remarriage of his grand niece.¹³⁶ While Chu Hsi encouraged behavior that was different from popular custom, as a magistrate he did not intervene with traditional practices and did not press for changes in the law.

Learning of the Way followers in the generation after Chu Hsi, however, took a more aggressive approach to issues of women and property, and began attacking the legal foundation of women's property rights. The most striking example is Chu Hsi's disciple and son-in-law Huang Kan (1152-1221). Huang's attitudes are of importance because, of all of the Learning of the Way philosophers, he was to have the greatest influence in the Yüan dynasty. The Confucianism that came to dominate at court and among officials of the Yüan was Huang Kan's interpretation of the Learning of the Way.¹³⁷

Huang was from Fu-chou, Fukien, but spent time studying at Chu Hsi's academy in Chien-yang. He served in office in various parts of Fukien, and a number of his judicial decisions survive. Huang promoted patriarchal authority and strict patrilineality in both his public and private life. Like other Learning of the Way followers, he was concerned with shoring up agnatic solidarity within the descent group. We do not find him promoting the archaic and idealistic descent-line system; rather, we find Huang concerned with practical issues of how to strengthen his own descent group with realistic methods suitable to the present. One issue of special concern was that of grave sites and grave rites. He believed in graveside sacrifices as an important part of Confucian ritual, and in his own family he worked to preserve a communal graveyard and promote group rites, for which he set up an endowment. He saw women's access to property as a threat to the agnatic descent group. A dispute in his own family over his ancestors' gravelands drove home to him the threat that women's access to property presented to the agnate group, and this may have made him especially critical of laws and practices that protected women's dowry.

136 *Chu Wen-kung wen-chi*, 92:9b; Chan, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, 179. When asked about arranging this remarriage, Chu Hsi responded, as recorded in the *Classified Conversations*, "Generally speaking, [widow chastity] should be the case. But people cannot follow that absolutely"; *Chu-tzu yü-lei* (Beijing: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1986), 96:2473 (Vol. 6). In a letter to a friend Chu Hsi again contrasted practicality with principle: "If you look at it from the point of view of custom, it truly seems impracticable, but if you look at it from the point of view of one who knows the classics and understands principle (*li*), then you know one cannot deviate from this [precept of widow chastity]"; *Chu Wen-kung wen-chi*, 26:29a. For more discussion see Birge, "Chu Hsi and Women's Education," 339-40.

137 Chan, "Chu Hsi and Yüan Neo-Confucianism."

The graveyard dispute lasted more than twenty years and involved several lawsuits and appeals to local headmen and lineage elders. In the early thirteenth century, Huang described the prolonged and nasty battle in a final appeal to the authorities.¹³⁸ Huang's ancestors, going back three hundred years, he claimed, had founded the graveyard outside the East gate of Fu-chou city and had built a Buddhist shrine on it. Huang's father had converted part of the shrine into a study, but at the behest of his aunt (or possibly his sister, Huang Kan's paternal aunt), had allowed a female cousin to live there with her husband, Chao Kung-heng. They subsequently had twelve children and took over the whole shrine as their living quarters, then began grazing horses on the tomb lands and blocking the path to the sacrifices. Despite court orders against them, the sons even violated the eighteen paces of "sacred space" around the tombs. Confrontations ensued, becoming violent at times. Things got worse when the Chao grandsons knocked down repairs made to the earthen tomb mounds and cut down a bamboo grove shading the graveyard.¹³⁹ Reading between the lines, it seems that the Chaos could flout the rulings against them, either because of the influence of low-level officials in the Chao family (which may have been related to the imperial clan), or general squatters' rights.

In his complaint, Huang Kan lamented that affinal ties could not guarantee good relations or respect for ritual:

The sons of Chao Chang-kuan [Kung-heng] were born of a woman of the Huang family herself [i.e., not a concubine]. Thus the tombs are those of their own mother's ancestors. Even if they cannot treat their maternal uncles in a moral way, can they not think of their own mother? If they cannot think of their own mother, what would they not stoop to? They do not respect the laws of the dynasty, they do not obey the injunctions of the lineage head, they do not give consideration to their mother's own relatives. Can this be human?¹⁴⁰

We do not know the exact outcome of the case, but it seems that Huang's intervention resulted in some redress, for it was after this that he endowed lands to support the communal graveside sacrifices. Significantly, however, Huang was afraid the court might divide the land between the male and female lines. He argued explicitly against this, saying there was already too little space for proper sacrifices, and lamented, "If the area is divided, how could I face my ancestors below?"¹⁴¹ This would suggest that the female cousin, originally granted use of the study, may have had some inheritance claim to the land it was on.

138 Patricia Ebrey, "Early Stages in the Development of Descent Group Organization," in *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ebrey and Watson, 26-7.

139 *Mien-chai chi* (SKCS chen pen ed.), 28:31b-34b.

140 *Mien-chai chi*, 28:34a. 141 *Mien-chai chi*, 28:34b.