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Discursive Weaving Women
in Chinese and Greek Traditions

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Rhetoric of the Loom:
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In both ancient Greece and early China, weaving was closely inter-stitched with the female identity. Curiously, in these two largely patriarchal and androcentric traditions, women used this quintessential female vocation as a metaphorical and discursive vehicle to express their thoughts and offer critical commentary on the male/political sphere. Though considered “women’s work,” weaving, with its rich history and intricate, interdependent technical processes, paradoxically afforded women a linguistic vehicle to discuss matters outside the domestic sphere. Just as a bureaucratic system is constituted of many interdependent parts that need to function effectively and efficiently for government to work successfully, so a loom is made up of many components that need to operate smoothly for weaving to proceed expeditiously. For their part — in what might be termed a “loophole” of sorts in the patriarchal discursive fabric — men in both traditions did not seek to silence the discourse precisely because it was mediated through a traditionally female occupation, elegantly couched in what might be called “the language of the loom.”

It is well beyond the scope of this study to engage in a systematic study of the cultural or technological history of weaving in early and medieval China or in ancient Greece. Building on the work of Lisa Vetter, Francisca Bray, Lisa Raphals, Bret Hinsch, Dieter Kuhn, Thomas Webster, and others, this paper primarily attempts to engage in detail with the mechanics of what Lisa Raphals terms the “weaving-government metaphor” in both cultures. To this end, the essay contains short case studies on the role of weaving in the political rhetoric of female emperor Wu

Zhao¹ 武曩 (624–705, r. Zhou dynasty 690–705) and in Arisophanes' play *Lysistrata*. The conclusion, based on a comparison of Lady Ji of Lu and *Lysistrata*, offers several tentative preliminary observations on the respective natures of "the language of the loom" in China and Greece.

Weaving and Womanhood — Early China

In early and medieval China, womanhood was, as Francesca Bray puts it, "defined by the making of cloth: with a few rare exceptions, a weaver was by definition a woman, and a woman was by definition a weaver."² The gendered division of labor in traditional China was sometimes expressed with the terse proverb "men plow and women weave" (*nan geng, nü zhi* 男耕女織).³ This division reflected "a relationship of complementarity rather than subordination": of tremendous cultural importance, weaving was fundamental to the well-being of family and the strength of state.⁴ Sericulture (and other textile production) gave women in early China a constructive economic role, affording them greater wealth and status within the family.

Bret Hinsch has pointed out that in early Chinese historical writings, silk weaving became part of the fabric of Confucian family values, coming to be seen not only as an essential

¹ While in most secondary scholarship she is known as Wu Zetian 武則天 or Empress Wu 武后, throughout this paper I use the self-styled designation Wu Zhao she assumed in 689. For her assumption of the name Zhao, see *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance], Sima Guang 司馬光, comp. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995) 204.6263; and *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New Tang History], Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 comp. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997; hereafter *XTS*), 76.3481.

² Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 183.

³ In the section titled "Paired Virtues: Plowing and Weaving" (185–191), Bret Hinsch, "Textiles and Female Virtue in Early Imperial Chinese Historical Writings," *Nan nü* 5, no. 2 (2003) also examines the gendered pairing *geng sang* 耕桑 (plowing and growing mulberries).

⁴ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 183 and 237.

part of women's work, but as a "moral activity," a fundamental good.⁵ As Hinsch explains in *Women in Early Imperial China*,

To early Chinese, womanhood was not just an abstract passive female identity. A person became a true, complete, and successful woman by actualizing the major female roles that society expected of her. A woman weaving at the loom was doing far more than just producing valuable cloth. She was also acting out a gendered role that contributed to her overall social identity. Spinning, sewing, weaving, and dyeing were all ways of *being* a woman.⁶

Thus, in *Instructions for Women* (Nü jie 女戒) a Confucian guide to aid a woman surviving in, navigating through, and flourishing among her in-laws, celebrated Eastern Han (8–220 AD) poet-historian Ban Zhao 班昭 (45-116) placed "wholehearted devotion to sew and weave," at the forefront of the paragraph on "women's work" (*nü gong* 女功), an important facet of deportment complementing womanly virtue, speech and appearance.⁷

Major female divinities and culture heroes in Chinese folklore and early annals were closely connected to weaving. The *sheng* 勝 headdress of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) may have represented a weaving implement, the brake pedal of the loom.⁸ Leizu 嫫祖 the Silk Goddess, spouse of the Yellow Emperor (the warrior god and civilizing force heralding from hoary antiquity), created the loom and sericulture. She later emerged as a cultic

⁵ Hinsch, "Textiles and Female Virtue," 171–172.

⁶ Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 68–69.

⁷ Ban Zhao, "Instructions for Women" in *Hou Han Shu* 後漢書 [History of the Later Han], ed. Fan Ye 范曄 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 84.2789, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: Volume I: From Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. William de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 824, originally in *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, Nancy Swann trans. (New York: Century, 1932), 86.

Francisca Bray (*Technology and Gender*, 184) has noted that one of the variant forms of *gong* 工 (work) included the radical signifying "silk" or "textiles."

⁸ Michael Como, *Weaving and Binding: Immigrant Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 99–100.

goddess. On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the star-crossed Weaving Girl (Zhinü 織女) and her mortal lover the Oxherd Boy (Niulang 牛郎) are re-united for an evening. In addition, the lasting renown of mortal women like Lady Ji of Lu and the Mother of Confucian sage Mencius was closely twined to the loom.

Weaving and Womanhood: Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece, as in early and medieval China, weaving was women's work — as John Gould puts it, "the woman's orientation is domestic": women's tasks like weaving and food provision were time-consuming and kept her homebound.⁹ In her work *Prehistoric Textiles*, E. J. W. Barber remarked that in the multi-faceted process involving combbers, fullers, scutchers, retters, dyers, thread-spinners and seamstresses, "most of the textile specialists were women."¹⁰ She adds the significant reflexive observation that "not only do women clearly dominate the textile industry, but clearly also the textile industry dominates the women."¹¹ Mothers taught girls the craft at a young age. Lisa Vetter observed that "No image captures better the view of the ideal woman of the time than the weaver who sits at her loom, making garments and textiles that serve to bind her family together."¹² Citing images of flirtatious carders and alluringly clad women toting wool baskets, Eva Keuls has observed that weaving was associated with the "qualities of industry, obsequiousness, and fear and awe of the male," characteristics that Greek men found attractive.¹³

⁹ John Gould, "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens," *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 100 (1990): 48.

¹⁰ E. J. W. Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 283. Barber's Chapter 13, "Women's Work," offers a cross-cultural perspective on the central role of women in weaving. Barber's opening chapter, "A Tradition and a Reason" in *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), 29–41, examines the social and economic reasons — many of them connected to child-rearing and domesticity — that led weaving to become "women's work."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹² Lisa Vetter, "Women's Work" as *Political Art: Weaving and Dialectical Politics in Homer, Aristophanes, and Plato* (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2005), 4.

¹³ Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 252–256.

Historical records illustrate that Greek women both literally and metaphorically used weaving to bind the social fabric. Pausanias, an itinerant scholar from the second century AD, recorded that every fourth year on the northwest Peloponnesus an all-women Olympiad was staged at Heraea. After peace was secured between Pisa and Elis, to ceremonially mark the congregation of polises for sport, not war, sixteen venerable women from the region jointly wove a robe (*peplus*) for a statue of Hera. This quadrennial rite of collective weaving was repeated so that "peace of the entire region was woven or rewoven. The original disorder, the raw wool, was replaced by organized fabric, in which each fiber was in place."¹⁴

Goddesses and divine beings were also associated with weaving. Wise Athena was regarded as the goddess of weaving. The powerful weaving of the Moirai, the Three Fates, held the tenuous threads of human destiny — fear and awe surrounded the trio of venerable women who respectively spun forth, allotted, and severed the lives of men. Many of the most celebrated women in Greek tradition were also closely tied to weaving. In the *Odyssey*, lovely and clever Penelope wove by day and unraveled by night her intricate handiwork, a funerary cloth for her father-in-law Laertes, to keep the suitors at bay in the absence of her peripatetic husband.¹⁵ Gloria Ferrari observes that Penelope's wool-work "epitomizes her virtues as a chaste wife."¹⁶ Theseus only escaped from the labyrinth of the minotaur thanks to the warp thread proffered by Ariadne.¹⁷ Offending mighty Athena, prideful Arachnae was transformed into a spider for

¹⁴ John Schied and Jesper Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10–12. For more on this "duty and privilege" of young, upper-class Athenian women, see Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles*, 292.

¹⁵ Homer, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, Samuel Butler trans. (El Paso, Tex.: El Paso Norte Press, 2006), 279 (a scene in which Antinous, chief suitor, vents his anger at being thwarted for so long by this ruse). For a detailed explanation as to how Penelope was able to forestall the troublesome suitors for so long, see Barber 1991, Chapter 16, "And Penelope?" 358–363.

¹⁶ Gloria Ferrari, *Figures of Speech: Men and Maidens in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 57.

¹⁷ Schied and J Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus*, 43.

boasting of her weaving prowess. After being raped and having her tongue cut out, Philomena found her voice through the loom.¹⁸

Enmeshing nearly the totality of the Greek world, weaving was intrinsically social and political — it comprised the fabric of life, the fabric of text, the fabric of love and marriage, the political texture of the government, forming the material from which the entire culture was wrought. In *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric*, John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro offer the following commentary on the paramount cultural importance of weaving in Greek culture: "Among the representations the Greeks made of society, of the bonds between men and the cohesion of human groups, or even the city, there is one that seems to fabricate society more than any other: weaving."¹⁹ The homespun process of weaving featured "the interlacing of warp and woof," an "interweaving signifying the union of opposites."²⁰ In literal weaving, this meant a fluid interstitching of the vertical and horizontal. In a political sense, it might be understood metaphorically. As the authors of *The Craft of Zeus* put it, "To weave is to unite, to interlace, to bind," and as such it becomes a visible, tangible "way to conceive of life and society."²¹ Only intricate weaving rivaled the tangled intrigues of statesmanship, the challenge of mending rifts between eminent families in court, and the suturing of differences and enmities between constituencies.

¹⁸ In Chapter 10, "Behind the Myths," Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), 232–244, gives the cultural background of all of these weaving-related stories.

¹⁹ Schied and Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6. Weaving and fabric are also associated with matrimony, sometimes thought of in terms of the interwoven union of the vertical, stiff warp (male) and the horizontal, supple weft (female). There is also a Trojan martial rite in Vergil's *Aeneid*, a military dance that was "an elaborate enactment of the metaphor of weaving," training men through a complex series of choreographed movements. The troops would split, riding in opposite directions, then make peace and ride in an even line (42–43).

An Elegant Thread Through Time: From Silk Goddess to Weaver Women to Wu Zhao

As empress (655–683), grand dowager-regent (684–690), and ultimately as China's first and only female emperor (690–705), Wu Zhao dominated court and politics in a remarkable career that lasted for half a century. Her gender and the resultant precarious nature of her power forced this historical anomaly to deploy language, symbol, and ideology in a unique and creative manner. In the female-dominated art of weaving, she discerned both the tremendous latent political currency and the inbuilt limitations. Particularly as empress, with the same adroitness and acuity that Silk Goddess Leizu and the Weaver Girl moved their nimble fingers in popular imagination, executing a warp and weft design of peerless intricacy, Wu Zhao wielded the rhetoric of weaving.

As Tang Gaozong's 唐高宗 (r. 649–683) empress, Wu Zhao played an active and visible role. From the very beginning, she availed herself of the political efficacy vested in weaving. In the spring of 656, newly-appointed empress Wu Zhao performed a sacrifice to the First Sericulturist (Xiancan 先蠶), Silk Goddess Leizu, leading eminent ladies of the state to pick mulberry leaves and feed them to silkworms.²² Overall, as empress, Wu Zhao performed the vernal ceremonies dedicated to Leizu on four occasions. Garnering mulberry leaves and silk weaving were the primary economic activities for women, and Wu Zhao's central role in the public performance of this rite, surrounded by a wider circle of women, marked her as foremost among women, the human link to the divine Silk Goddess.²³ These rites re-confirmed the inner quarters of the palace as a model center of women's labor and the performers of the rite as shining exemplars of womanly virtue — none more radiant, of course, than the empress herself.

In *Myth and Reality*, historian of religion Mircea Eliade remarked that, "a certain tribe

²² *JTS* 4.75; *XTS* 3.57; *Tongdian* 通典 [Comprehensive Manual of Institutions], ed. Du You 杜佑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 46.1190; *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 [Essential Institutions of the Tang], ed. Wang Pu 王溥 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998; hereafter *THY*), 10.260.

²³ Chen Jo-shui, "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed. Frederick Brandauer and Chih-chieh Huang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 79–80. Rothschild, "Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2003), 56–57; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York: Longman World Biography Series 2008), 46.

live by fishing — because in mythical times a Supernatural Being taught their ancestors to catch and cook fish. The myth tells the story of the first fishery, and, in so doing, at once reveals a superhuman act, teaches men to perform it, and, finally, explains why this particular tribe must procure their food this way.”²⁴ So it was when Wu Zhao, in paying ceremonial homage to Leizu, re-enacted the discovery and invention of silk-weaving, connecting herself to the apotheosized culture heroine and establishing herself as keeper of the original knowledge of a craft that defined Chinese civilization and defined womanhood.

This elegant, choreographed public ceremony politicized weaving on a grand stage, broadcasting Wu Zhao’s role as the ideal Confucian wife and first lady of the empire to the widest possible audience. And yet to some extent this ritualized act only served to confirm her role within the domestic sphere. Wu Zhao never performed the sericulture rite after 675. Leizu, an important cultic deity during her time as empress, all but disappeared. As grand dowager and emperor, she faced a mind-bending rhetorical challenge: how could she utilize the social and political currency vested in weaving not merely to talk about statecraft and the male sphere, but to justify a woman’s (her own) active rulership? To accomplish this difficult task, she looked not to a goddess, but to a pair of celebrated weaving women from the Eastern Zhou (771–221 BC).

Lessons of the Loom: Two Models of Maternal Rectitude in Regulations for Ministers

Both Lady Ji of Lu and the Mother of Mencius appear in the Preface of *Regulations for Ministers* (Chen gui 臣軌), an eclectic political treatise created in 685 by Wu Zhao and her Scholars of the Northern Gate (Beimen xueshi 北門學士) that demanded absolute loyalty of court officials.²⁵

²⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 12.

²⁵ *Chen gui*, compiled by Wu Zetian, in *Zhongjing ji qita wuzhong* 忠經及其他五種, *Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編 0893 (Taipei: Shangwu, 1936; hereafter *CG*). For a more detailed overview of both text and context, see Denis Twitchett, “Chen Gui and Other Works Attributed to Wu Zetian,” *Asia Major* 16 (2003): 33–110. *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [Complete Anthology of Tang Prose], ed. Dong Gao 董浩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996); 97.1004–5 contains the Preface to the *Regulations for Ministers*. For content of the body of the *Chen gui*, its authorship and its elevation to a compulsory examination text in 693, also see Rothschild, “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies,” chapter 5 and Appendix Three.

Both women also appear in "Models of Maternal Rectitude" (mu yi 母儀), the opening chapter of Liu Xiang's original Han guide for Confucian womanly comportment, *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. Wu Zhao's abbreviated account of these women read: "In the past though Wenbo 文伯 was already a man of distinction, his mother still added the metaphor of the axle; though Mencius was already a worthy man, his mother added the lesson of the cut weaving to instruct him."²⁶ 昔文伯既達，仍加喻軸之言；孟軻已賢，更益斷机之誨。

The mother of Wenbo mentioned in the first segment is Lady Ji of Lu 魯季, Jing Jiang 敬姜, a widow of the late Spring and Autumn era (sixth century BC). Not only was she featured prominently in the opening chapter of *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, but also in other Warring States and Han sources like the *Book of Rites* (Li ji 禮記), the *Narrative of States* (*Guoyu* 國語) and the *Accounts of the Warring States* (Zhanguo ce 戰國冊). In all of these texts, Jing Jiang was depicted "as a woman of considerable expertise, who operates within (and appears to approve of) the gender codes of her society, but with no loss of acumen in expressing her views on both state and domestic affairs to her male relatives."²⁷

²⁶ CG, Preface, 1.

²⁷ Lisa Raphals, "A Woman Who Understood the Rites," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 275–276. This section of the sub-chapter is not intended to provide an exhaustive study of Lady Ji of Lu and of all the wise counsel she offered Wenbo and other members of the Ji family. Raphals provides an extended and nuanced account of Lady Ji of Lu, illustrating that Jing Jiang's renown pre-dated the Western Han *Biographies of Women*. The *Narrative of States* from the early Warring States era (481–221 BC), for instance, includes eight separate passages on Lady Ji of Lu, many of which reveal the powerful moral suasion that she, as a widowed mother, exercised over her son Wenbo. She also instructed him on proper ceremonial deportment in hosting guests. She was well known for being a perfect Confucian daughter-in-law, revering her parents-in-law with due devotion, and for properly mourning her deceased husband.

Also see Zhou Yiqun, *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations in Ancient China and Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 245–247. In this work, Zhou notes several stories cited and translated from *Biographies for Exemplary Women* are drawn from the "Narrative of Lu" (Luyu 魯語), chapter 2 in the *Narrative of States*.

For more basic background on the *Narrative of States*, a 21-chapter work likely from the fourth century BC attributed to Zuo Qiuming 左丘明 and containing discourses on eight of the Warring States including the nominally-ruling Zhou, see Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia

In her biography, the longest of the 125 in Liu Xiang's work, "the metaphor of the axle" is but one in a series of instructive episodes in which the mother imparted wisdom to her son.²⁸ Contemporary scholar Zhou Yiqun has observed that Jing Jiang "was acting on behalf of family interest and ultimately speaking in patriarchal authority."²⁹ Certainly, her power and influence within her affinal family derived from her perfect adherence to Confucian principle. To wield this "patriarchal authority" with efficacy and confidence required far more than a widow parroting time-honored Confucian mores: it took a profound understanding of the classics, a mastery of language, an adept grasp of rhetoric, a nimble tongue, and an opportunity provided by familial circumstances.

To shape young Wenbo's character, Jing Jiang expounded on the humility and sagacity — the willingness to receive remonstrance and the meticulous self-perfection — of Zhou paragons like King Wu and the Duke of Zhou.³⁰ Once Wenbo became minister of the Lu, she instructed him on the finer points of ritual propriety and on statecraft, shaping not only her son's character as a moral man but his principles as a conscientious minister of state. (Indeed, she seems more concerned with the latter than the former, as if to suggest that being a loyal minister is a precondition to being a filial son). Wu Zhao's "metaphor of the axle" in *Regulations* was a reference to what Lisa Raphals terms the "weaving-government analogy," an intricate linguistic tapestry that Jing Jiang used to explicate to Wenbo the nature of good governance in which different parts of the loom corresponded to different interdependent administrative offices.³¹

Center, 1998), 460, and Michael Loewe, *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley, Calif.: The Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), 264.

²⁸ *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 [Biographies of Exemplary Women], eight chapters, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC), Song woodblock edition with illustrations by Gu Kaizhi 顧凱之 (345–409), chapter 1.9. Cited from University of Virginia e-text database: <http://etext.virginia.edu/chinese/lienu/browse/LienuImgTOC.html>; hereafter *LNZ*.

²⁹ Zhou Yiqun, *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations*, 258.

³⁰ *LNZ* 1.9.

³¹ Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 30–31; also see Raphals, "A Woman Who Understood the Rites," 278. Raphals translates Lady Ji of Lu's "weaving-government analogy" from Liu Xiang's *Biographies of Women*. Albert O'Hara, *Position of Women in*

Raphals has illustrated that in Liu Xiang's original text careful correspondence is drawn between eight parts of the loom and the same number of various civil and military officers, central and local bureaucrats — from the Director of Messengers (*da xing* 大行), moving fluidly from hand to hand like the shuttle (*kun* 拵), to the general (*jiang* 將) who plays the role of the selvage (*fu* 幅), the vital straight border of woven cloth that keeps the pattern even. The pivot that turns the entire analogy, the axle (*zhou* 軸), parallels the minister (*xiang* 相), "the one who can fill an important office, travel a long road, and is upright, genuine and firm."³² A seventeenth-century thinker, Song Yingxing, observed that weaving and government share a common vocabulary: *zhi* 治 means "to govern" or "to reel silk"; *luan* 亂 means "civil disorder" or "raveling a skein"; *jing* 經, "canonical texts" or "warp threads"; and *lun* 論, "philosophical discourse" or "silk yarn."³³ This shared language reflects the metaphorical potency of weaving, and provided women a measure of political and moral purchase.

Following this weaving–government analogy, Lady Ji of Lu offered her grown but misguided son further counsel, once again evocatively through the medium of weaving. When Wenbo urged her to stop weaving and enjoy a relaxed, luxurious life, Jing Jiang sighed, "Lu is done for!" Testifying to the symbolic significance of the First Sericulturist rites, she vehemently remonstrated that in former times the diligence of queens and noblewomen in weaving ceremonial apparel served to set standards for commoners' wives properly to clothe their families. If Wenbo as a minister of state failed to grasp even this essential thread, the state of Lu was doomed.³⁴

As noted earlier, in early China weaving was women's work for the inner, familial sphere. In the "Domestic Rules" (*Nei ze* 內則) chapter of the *Book of Rites*, it was famously recorded

Early China (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), 30–37, translates Lady Ji of Lu's full biography from *Biographies of Exemplary Women*.

³² Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, 31, and Raphals, "The Woman Who Understood the Rites," 277, trans. of LNZ 1.9.

³³ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 191.

³⁴ LNZ 1.9. Raphals, "The Woman Who Understood the Rites," 278–279 paraphrases this story.

that "men do not speak of inner, women do not speak of the outer."³⁵ Within the inner sphere, women wielded tremendous influence. Lady Ji of Lu found an unlikely champion in contemporary Confucius, who held her in high esteem. When the sage learned of Jing Jiang's didactic engagement with matters in the public and political realm, he remarked:

Disciples, note! The woman of Ji was not licentious. The *Odes*' saying

Women have no public charge,

But tend their silkworms and their looms

means that a woman has public charge by virtue of her weaving and spinning. If she leaves them, she contravenes the rites.³⁶

Because Lady Ji of Lu never quit her station at the loom and her sage instruction to her son in the outer, public sphere is articulated through the metaphorical language of weaving, Confucius admiringly acknowledged that she had "a public charge by virtue of her weaving and spinning."³⁷ It is testament to her virtuosity in language that Jing Jiang's metaphorical instruction on statecraft was homespun from her familiar loom. Honored as a shining model of Confucian ritual protocol, the Jing Jiang celebrated in Wu Zhao's *Regulations*, like the strong-willed

³⁵ *Liji Zhengyi* 禮儀正義 [Book of Rites] (vol. 6 in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注書) ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), 829, "Neize" [Rules of the Inner Domain].

³⁶ LNZ 1.9. citing *Book of Songs*, Mao 264. Translation from Raphals, "The Woman Who Understood the Rites," 279.

³⁷ This passage is not the only place Confucius praised Lady Ji of Lu. Learning of the wise instruction she had given Wenbo's concubines after her sons's death, Confucius remarked in the *Narrative of States* that "her wisdom is like that of a man. She desired to make clear her son's estimable virtue." See translation in Paul Rakita Goldin, "The View of Women in Early Confucianism," in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, ed. Li Chenyang (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 141, c.f. *Guoyu* 5.211. For further background on the admiration of Confucius for Jing Jiang, on the debate as to the extent to which these contemporaries knew each other, on whether Wenbo was Confucius's disciple, and on the nature of Confucius's interaction with the Ji clan, see Raphals 2002.

matriarch in Warring States and Han texts, was "a decisive and powerful woman who did not hesitate to intervene in either family matters or affairs of state."³⁸

Better grasping his own role and responsibility, the newly-risen minister Wenbo humbly bowed to his mother, acknowledging that her intricate metaphor had elucidated his grasp of the mechanisms of government. Wu Zhao no doubt hoped that, upon receiving the instructions in her political manual, her ministers would respond in a similar fashion. Indeed, from the reference to Jing Jiang and the nature of *Regulations*, it seems that the text was an effort to condition this sort of response.

The central figure in the second segment of the aforementioned line from the Preface of *Regulations for Ministers* was the renowned mother of Mencius. The pithy remark, "though Mencius was already a worthy man, his mother added the lesson of the cut weaving to instruct him,"³⁹ is an encapsulation of the best known of powerful lessons the Mother of Mencius imparted to her callow son. In the opening chapter of *Biographies for Women* a more substantial account of the story of Mother Meng is recorded:

Once when Mencius was young, he had just returned home from studying. Mother Meng was weaving. She asked how far his studies had progressed. Mencius answered, "About the same as before." Mother Meng then took a knife and cut her weaving. Terrified, Mencius asked the reason. Mother Meng responded, "My son's waste of his time studying is like me cutting my weaving. The superior man studies to establish his reputation; he makes inquiries in order to amplify his knowledge. This is because if his purpose is fixed, then it will bring security and tranquility; if it wavers, it can cause long-lasting harm. If you waste your time now, you will not be able to avoid becoming a laborer, and will be unable to avoid catastrophes and worries. How is that different from one who is weaving quitting her work mid-thread? How could she rely on her husband and son and not lack grain to eat? A woman who quits on that which she depends on to eat is like a

³⁸ Raphals, "The Woman Who Understood the Rites," 292.

³⁹ *CG*, Preface, 2.

degenerate man who gives up on his cultivation of virtue. If he doesn't end up a thief, he'll end up a lackey." Mencius was terrified and thereafter studied assiduously morning and night, without cease. He served his teacher Zi Si and became a famous Confucian scholar known empire-wide.⁴⁰

Once again, while the embroidery may be less intricate and the metaphor less elaborate than in the case of Lady Ji of Lu, weaving played a central role in defining female virtue. For the mother of Mencius, industrious textile production marked her fulfillment of her role as a widow and a mother — weaving not merely to earn profit, but to help sustain her son's education.⁴¹ She admonished her son that his haphazard approach toward study would prove calamitous, and inevitably reduce him to becoming a thief or lackey. Alternatively, diligent application to study might help him to cultivate virtue and become a *junzi*, a true gentleman. Of course, officials who read *Regulations for Ministers* were entirely familiar with *Biographies of Exemplary Women* and did not need the whole story recounted.

Wu Zhao's pairing of Lady Ji of Lu and the Mother of Mencius in the Preface was not unusual. Raphals points out that each woman was a "didactic widow" who "took on a "male" role and excelled in the education of her son."⁴² Josephine Chiu-Duke observes the repeated appearances of both of these celebrated mothers on Tang epitaphs, representing the continuity of an established convention that honored public-minded mothers bent on raising their sons to be

⁴⁰ LNZ 1.11. For a full translation of the biography of the Mother of Mencius, see "The Mother of Mencius" in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, trans. by Nancy Gibbs, ed. Patricia Ebrey, 2nd edition (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 72–74. O'Hara (39–42) and Raphals (33–35) have also translated this biography. For a short biography, see Constance Cook's entry "Mother of Mencius" in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women, Antiquity through Sui, 1600 BC – 618 AD*, eds. Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A. D. Stefanowska (Armonk NY: ME Sharpe, 2007), 46–47.

⁴¹ Hinsch, in "Textiles and Female Virtue," remarks that "The industrious widow working at the loom to earn money for her son's education was still praised as a moral paragon even though she sold her cloth" (179). He uses the Mother of Mencius as an example of a Confucian textual tradition of the image of "moralistic" or "virtuous" textile tradition by women.

⁴² Raphals, "The Woman Who Understood the Rites," 283.

loyal, incorruptible officials.⁴³ Such mothers tended to be honored in official narratives because their sons' "filial conduct and loyal service reinforced each other without contradiction."⁴⁴ If the mother in question was at once widow-emperor, wise instructress, and authorial voice, then loyalty and filial piety could both be marshaled without obstruction to single-minded service to state.

By Wu Zhao's time, both Jing Jiang and the Mother of Mencius had gained longstanding reputations, in the words of contemporary scholar Zhou Yiqun, as "intelligent, eloquent and authoritative mothers and mothers-in-law praised for the good upbringing they gave their sons and for their impeccable administration of the house."⁴⁵ Like these sage paragons heralding from more than a millennium earlier, Wu Zhao was a dutiful widow whose responsibility to edify her sons — a conscientious accountability to her deceased husband and affinal family — morally compelled her to play a vocal, assertive role. As grand dowager and emperor, Wu Zhao far surpassed both women in terms of political engagement, these widely accepted and strong female role models helped justify her open, public involvement as mother of the realm.

Immediately after the brief reference to these two paragons of "Maternal Rectitude," Lady Ji of Lu and the Mother of Mencius, the Preface of *Regulations* continues:

Recently, instructions for self-cultivation have been compiled for the heir apparent and for the princes. But as yet no model rules for providing information

⁴³ Josephine Chiu-Duke, "Mothers and the Well-being of State in Tang China," *Nan Nü: Women and Gender in China* 8, no. 1 (2006), 65–82.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 73. In a case of historical irony, the mother of Huan Yanfan, one of the conspirators who deposed Wu Zhao in 705, urged her son to go through with the coup, telling him that "When loyalty and filial piety cannot coexist, it is all right that you do your duty to the state first" (*XTS* 120.4313; 76, translates this passage). For this mother, ministerial loyalty meant the repudiation of Wu Zhao's Zhou and the restoration of the Tang. Chiu-Duke cites several other examples of Tang mothers who, as good Confucian matriarchs, conscientiously objected to their sons serving a female ruler — she even has a sub-chapter titled "Resistance to Empress Wu," 82–85.

⁴⁵ Zhou Yiqun, *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations*, 246.

on loyalty and guidance of goodness have been set forth for the assembled nobles and the ranks of those appointed to office.⁴⁶

In this transition from motherly concern for the well-being of her flesh-and-blood children to a symbolic preoccupation with her "children" of the larger empire, the Preface shifts to the central theme of the text: the paramount importance of ministerial loyalty. As Wu Zhao puts it in the Preface, sounding as though it were the mundane casual pursuit of most sexagenarian spinsters, "Now in the leisure of my mornings, my mind wanders to questions of policy and government."⁴⁷ In this manner, these two episodes were woven into the opening of Wu Zhao's political manifesto that demanded total loyalty from ministers, a critical rhetorical part of her transition from conscientious mother of the imperial princes to ur-mother of a wider polity.

The affiliation between Wu Zhao and two politically savvy sage mothers served to legitimize her role in government. To mute the criticism of the court, she situated herself as a patron of Confucian learning and an enthusiastic champion of Confucian virtues, a strategy that she used effectively time and again. She insinuated herself into tradition: to attack her was to attack these paragons of Confucian principle and virtue. Like Lady Ji of Lu and the mother of Mencius, she was a widow and a mother concerned with the education of her sons. But as dowager, she considered the realm to be her in-laws' estate and property and took her ministers and subjects as political sons. Therein lay the essential difference between these women separated by a gulf of a millennium: the two Eastern Zhou paragons instructed consanguine sons; in *Regulations*, Wu Zhao edified political sons. Just as the flesh-and-blood sons of these two paragons bowed upon receiving sage instruction from their celebrated Confucian mothers, so Wu Zhao's political sons, receiving her instruction, were to genuflect before the female ruler.

Wu Zhao's political appropriation of the "weaving-government analogy" shares a common ground with Plato's *Statesman*, a Socratic dialogue written roughly half a century after

⁴⁶ CG, 2. Translation from Twitchett, "Chen Gui and Other Works," 56. Twitchett (55–56) cites this passage specifically to show that *Regulations for Ministers* was "part of a program of normative political texts," interconnected to other manuals that she and the Scholars of the Northern Gate produced in the 670s and 680s.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Lysistrata, in which weaving is similarly described as an art analogous to rulership. Plato juxtaposes the statesman with lesser sophists and rhetoricians; the weaver, with lesser craftsmen like fullers and carders.⁴⁸ The point, as tidily summed up by Svenbro and Scheid, is that statesmanship "weaves all into its unified fabric with perfect skill."⁴⁹ The text culminates with the image of a Platonian weaver-king presiding over a close-woven, harmonious state, where he skillfully intermeshes the respective merits of the gentle and the brave to make a close and firm "fabric in which opposing forces of the city are mastered for the benefit of the social peace."⁵⁰ This vision bears an uncanny resemblance to the image of Wu Zhao as weaver-queen presiding over a pluralistic, cosmopolitan empire with many competing, coexisting ethnicities and ideologies. A thread runs through time, a sororal bond of sorts plaiting the female sovereign to the female divinity, whose creation of sericulture she re-enacted, and to the paragons from the Eastern Zhou she so skillfully interwove in her political philosophy.

An Example of Weaving as Metaphor for Government from Ancient Greece

To end the destructive Peloponnesian Wars in the late fifth century BC, *Lysistrata*, the eponymous heroine in Aristophanes' play (written in that same era), gathered women from Greek city-states in Athens — just the sort of convocation the Greek menfolk had failed to bring about — and, after convincing them to withhold sex from menfolk, locked the warlike men outside the acropolis. Explaining to a magistrate why she had previously not protested the bellicose policy of the Athenian men, she remarked, "And if I had so much as said, 'Darling, why are you carrying on this silly policy?' he would glare at me and say 'Back to your weaving, woman, or you'll have a headache for a month. Go attend to your work; let war be the care of the menfolk.'"⁵¹ When the magistrate questioned how she would deal with the hopelessly muddled international crisis,

⁴⁸ Plato, *Statesman*, trans. J. B. Skemp (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 40–45.

⁴⁹ Scheid and Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus*, 28. It is worthy of note that in the *Statesman* both author and locutor are male.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30–31

⁵¹ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, trans. Alan Summerstein (New York: Penguin Classics, 1973), 201.

Lysistrata answers: "Well, take a tangled skein of wool, for example. We take it so, put it to the spindle, unwind it this way, now that way. That's how we'll unravel this war if you'll let us. Send ambassadors first to Sparta, this way, then to Thebes, that way."

Impervious to metaphor, the elderly magistrate responds with contempt: "Are you such idiots as to think that you can solve serious problems with spindles and bits of wool?"

Cheeky Lysistrata responds that "it might not be so idiotic as you think to run the whole City entirely on the model of the way we deal with wool." She proceeds to flesh out a "weaving-government analogy" tailored to suit Athens:

The first thing you do with wool is wash the grease out of it; you can do the same with the City. Then you stretch out the citizen body on a bench and pick out the burrs — that is, the parasites. After that you prise apart the club-members who form themselves into knots and clots to get into power, and when you've separated them, pick them out one by one. Then you're ready for the carding: they can all go into the basket of Civic Goodwill — including the resident aliens and any foreigners who are your friends — yes, and even those who are in debt to the Treasury! Not only that, Athens has many colonies. At the moment these are lying around all over the place, like stray bits and pieces of the fleece. You should pick them up and bring them here, put them all together, and then out of all this make an enormous great ball of wool — and from that you can make the People a coat.⁵²

Jeffrey Henderson observes that Lysistrata's eloquent metaphor "illustrates how wives can offer, in terms of their own sphere, advice on the City," on governance.⁵³ In Athens, as in neighboring Peloponnesus, the "weaving of the political or federal garment symbolizes the end of a complicated period marked by hostilities and war."⁵⁴ Indeed, as in Heraea, at a communal

⁵² *Lysistrata*, 203–204.

⁵³ Jeffrey Henderson, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 141.

⁵⁴ Scheid and Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus*, 17.

sacrifice to celebrate unity and harmony in Attica, every four years Athenian women were assigned to weave a *peplos* for the giant statue of Athena — the powerful goddess enjoyed the designation “patroness of the loom” among other epithets — in their polis.⁵⁵ Linguistically, Lysistrata compares the messy process of governing a state to the multi-faceted process of weaving. Only after going through the arduous processes of washing, carding, and stretching might the metaphorical fabric of society be woven into a harmonious whole. Lysistrata suggests that women, naturally, with their skill in weaving, are better endowed than their male counterparts to bring about this harmony.

Conclusions

Connected to clothing, one of the most essential markers of humanity and civilization, weaving is a multi-staged time- and labor-intensive process. In both ancient Greece and early and medieval China, this was publicly celebrated in elaborate ceremonies honoring patron goddesses of the craft. In both cultures, the familiarity of women with the weaving process was hard-won, gained from endless repetition, subtle variation, attention to minutiae, and intimate proximity to the time-intensive technical processes — knowledge of how to align a selvedge perfectly, insert weft thread into the shed, or tease a frayed warp thread through a heddle. Women’s mastery of this technical process and of the attendant intricate cant (specialized vocabulary) of the loom gave them an impressive breadth of knowledge that men could not but admire and appreciate. Clothes, tapestries, drapes, bolts of silk — the material fabrics of society — were ever-present reminders of this mastery. With its bedizening complexity, the art of weaving was custom-made

⁵⁵ Ibid., 17–18. Young girls in Athens also performed a rite of initiation in which they carried a covered basket that contained both the peplos of Athena and a snake or phallus into a cave. John Gould, drawing on earlier research of Walter Burkert, observed that this served to “celebrate and symbolize the dual function of women in the community: spinning and weaving, the making of clothes, the ‘tasks of women’; and sex and marriage, the conception of the child, the continued existence of the community itself” (Gould, 51). In Rome, a similar sort of collectively woven garment was offered chthonian deity Persephone as a propitiatory offering, in hopes that the goddess would not forsake the city. The community, according to the authors, wished “to manifest the unity and cohesion that should ideally belong to it. The rifts and dissension of the consuls must be countered with accord; the torn garment must be countered by one that is intact” (Scheid and Svenbro, 38).

for metaphor, and to an extent the women themselves were the fabricators and wielders of that metaphorical language.

Empowered to speak out within the discursive space weaving provided, women in both cultures might gain license, in certain circumstances, to speak metaphorically about politics and statecraft. Just as the craftswoman transformed tangled threads into a seamless, beautiful garment, so the sovereign who had mastered the arts of rulership might seek to unite disparate elements into a harmonious empire.

By way of a conclusion, I offer a series of tentative comparisons between the respective "weaving-government analogies" of rough contemporaries, *Lysistrata* and Lady Ji of Lu. The former is a character in a play. In an age of sophistry and rhetoric, one might contend that this strong female title character's voice is a male author's deft dramatic act of ventriloquism. But to contend that *Lysistrata* was a fictional construct while Lady Ji of Lu was a flesh-and-blood woman would be an over-simplification. One might similarly consider *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, a construction of Han dynasty Confucianism — a text honoring carefully culled women within certain narrow parameters, women who conformed to the boundaries of a patriarchal society and drew their moral suasion from that conformity. One might argue that Lady Ji of Lu and the Mother of Mencius, are, to a great extent, fictional constructs, carefully retrofit to categories like "benevolent and wise" or "models of maternal rectitude."

1. The analogies are different in kind. To guide her son and make him a worthy minister, Lady Ji of Lu offered a straightforward descriptive vision in which the interdependent parts of the loom corresponded to different bureaucratic offices. Presumably, just as understanding the proper mechanical roles of the different components of the loom might enable one to master the art of weaving, so truly apprehending bureaucratic functions of state might enable a prescient minister to manage subordinates and govern with circumspection and perspicacity. In contrast, *Lysistrata* offers not a description but a prescription, a plan, articulated through the different processes involved in weaving, to remedy the ills that have left the city-states divided. For her, weaving and politics mean bringing together disparate elements, even if some of these constituents are bad or impure. In short, these analogies present two different ideals: in China, the weaving-politics

metaphor was used to present the image of a well-run, efficient bureaucratic state; in Greece, the analogy was used to depict the uniting of disparate groups, different constituencies, into a harmonious whole.

2. The two visions have different feels, different textures. Reflecting perhaps the smooth, fluid texture of silk, the Chinese vision is antiseptic and bureaucratic. If Chinese conceptions of heaven and hell can be bracketed in familiar bureaucratic idiom, why not the loom. The Greek vision is presented in a raw, unfinished form (like coarser wool, the dominant fabric in ancient Greece), a much messier, more organic and lively material mass, featuring a society full of clots, burrs, and parasites.
3. As such, these two respective analogies reflect two very different visions of the nature of government. In Athenian democracy, political and discursive space is contested. Lysistrata, through the metaphorical vehicle of weaving, weighs in on the debate, proposing an inclusive governmental reform to get rid of cliques and incorporate marginal elements into the social fabric. In early and medieval China, there was no debate. Good government stemmed from the ruler's virtue and from an efficient bureaucracy in which each of the component parts properly played its role. As Confucius famously remarked: "Let the ruler be ruler, the minister be minister; let the father act as father, the son as son."⁵⁶ If everyone knew their place, the state would be well governed and the family harmonious. Thus, Lady Ji of Lu's vision features interdependent parts of the loom, which she, for the edification of her dense son, uses to explain the proper function of government.
4. In terms of the physical and mechanical construction of the metaphor, in China the analogy is narrowly framed by the loom itself. Built into the political vision of Lysistrata, however, there is an awareness of other essential related artisanal processes — wool gathering, stretching, and carding — involved in the larger process of weaving.
5. Finally, there is a more conscious awareness of and preoccupation with the people, the governed, in Lysistrata's analogy. She uses the metaphorical yield of her weaving to

⁵⁶ Confucius, *Analects* 12.11.

clothe the people. The foremost concern of Lady Ji of Lu is the public-mindedness of her son, the minister-axle. Admittedly, concern for the well-being of the people falls within the purview of Wenbo's duty as a minister of Lu. The parts of the Chinese loom are all government officials. The component crafts that make up the art of Greek weaving, on the other hand, are constituent groups in wider society.

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