

Belief systems

Belief systems, philosophies, and religions may seem to exist simply in the world of ideas, but they have considerable effects on people’s daily lives. Over time, concepts become parts of institutions that include rules and expectations for how people relate to one another—particularly the way women live in relation to their male counterparts and to society in general.

For example, women in China experienced very different social roles under [Confucianism and Daoism](#). Based on its written rules, Daoism gave more leeway for women to play active roles in religion and to make decisions about their lives. The written rules of Confucianism limited women’s power more severely, but it is unclear whether women actually abided by these rules in all cases. As with any religious or moral system, there is a difference between rules and how they are actually practiced.

	Views on women	Philosophies
Confucianism in Han China	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● FILIAL PIETY REQUIRED THAT PEOPLE RESPECT THEIR ELDERS AND ANCESTORS, ESPECIALLY MALE ONES.● THE IDEAL ROLE FOR A WOMAN WAS TO TAKE CARE OF A LARGE HOUSEHOLD.● WOMEN TYPICALLY DIDN'T HAVE FORMAL ROLES IN CONFUCIAN LIFE OUTSIDE THE HOME.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● BOTH CONFUCIANISM AND DAOISM HAVE THE CONCEPT OF YIN AND YANG, OR DUALITY.● WOMEN ARE SEEN AS PART OF THE YIN: YIELDING, SUBMISSIVE, SOFT, ETC.● MEN ARE SEEN AS PART OF THE YANG: AGGRESSIVE, POWERFUL, ETC.
Daoism in Han China	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● WOMEN WERE ALLOWED TO BE PRIESTS AND TEACHERS IN THE DAOIST TRADITION.● IN THE CLASSICAL DAOIST TEXT, THE DAODEJING, FEMININE CHARACTERISTICS SUCH AS FERTILITY, SOFTNESS, AND SUBMISSION ARE SEEN AS POSITIVE AND RESPECTED FEATURES.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● IN DAOISM, THE FEMALE CONTRIBUTION AS THE YIN IS MORE RESPECTED THAN IT IS IN CONFUCIANISM; IT IS SEEN AS A PART OF NATURE.● DAOISM SUGGESTS THAT A SOFTER, MORE YIELDING ATTITUDE MAY EVENTUALLY LEAD TO MORE FAVORABLE RESULTS.

Table comparing views on women and philosophies in Confucianism and Daoism in Han China.

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For Confucianism in Han China's views on women: - Filial piety required that people respect their elders and ancestors, especially male ones. - The ideal role for a woman was to take care of a large household. - Women typically didn't have formal roles in Confucian life outside the home.

For Daoism's views on women: - Women were allowed to be priests and teachers in the Daoist tradition. - In the classical Daoist text, the Daodejing, feminine characteristics such as fertility, softness, and submission are seen as positive and respected features.

For Confucian philosophy: - Both Confucianism and Daoism have the concept of Yin and Yang, or duality. - Women are seen as part of the Yin: yielding, submissive, soft, etc. - Men are seen as part of the Yang: aggressive, powerful, etc.

For Daoist philosophy: - In Daoism, the female contribution as the Yin is more respected than it is in Confucianism; it is seen as part of nature. - Daoism suggests that a softer, more yielding attitude may eventually lead to more favorable results.

Family and marriage

In many societies, women's primary roles revolved around motherhood and managing a household. While women in many different places and at different times had this in common, there were significant differences in how women performed these roles depending on kinship relations. Kinship is a broad concept which encompasses familial relationships, like those of common descent, blood relation, and marriage.

We can compare different kinship relations within one society. In Han China, a woman's power in a particular household depended on how she related to the men in the family. This is exemplified in the Confucian principle of the three obediences. According to this principle, a woman's first obedience is to her father before she is married, to her husband while she is married, and to her son after her husband dies. During the course of their lives, women were dependent on their male kin, but they had different levels of power depending on their age and influence over male family members. Mothers of influential older sons, for example, exercised far greater control over household affairs than a younger son's new bride.

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In this way, the [Han dynasty](#) understood the family as the core unit. Men were formally the heads of the family unit and exercised legal power over the women and children in the household. [Imperial Rome](#) was similar in that the pater familias—Latin for “the father of the family”—was legally responsible for the family unit.

Interestingly, in both societies, women exercised some legal power. For example, Roman women could own property and inherit after the deaths of their fathers. In Han China, the wills of women reveal that some older women held property, inherited assets, and managed businesses. Similarly, despite strict laws, both elite and ordinary women in Imperial Rome regularly bought and sold property with apparently very little constraint on their freedom. This suggests that formal roles for women were not always followed, and that women wielded informal power.

While the two societies share these similarities, they were different in other significant ways. For example, while women in Han China were mostly limited to separate women’s spaces, Roman homes were not formally segregated. Roman women were relegated to back rows of theatres and arenas, but they had more of a role in public life than their Han China counterparts, who were mostly limited to the private, domestic sphere. This can be seen in the fact that Roman women often dined with men and visited public baths, something women in Han China would not have been permitted to do.

	Formal legal status	Economic power	Role in public life
HAN CHINA	FORMALLY, WOMEN'S LIVES WERE CONTROLLED BY MALE KIN.	SOME WOMEN HAD WILLS AND MANAGED BUSINESSES.	WOMEN WERE MOSTLY LIMITED TO PRIVATE, SEGREGATED SPACES.
IMPERIAL ROME	PATER FAMILIAS WAS IN CHARGE OF THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN.	WOMEN COULD INHERIT AND OWN PROPERTY AFTER A FATHER'S DEATH.	WOMEN COULD GO OUT TO DINNER AND VISIT PUBLIC BATHS.

Table comparing the formal legal status, economic power, and roles in public life of women in Han China vs. Imperial Rome.

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For Formal Legal Status: - Han China: Formally, women's lives were controlled by male kin. - Imperial Rome: Pater familias was in charge of the women and children.

For Economic power: - Han China: Some women had wills and managed businesses. - Imperial Rome: Women could inherit and own property after a father's death.

For Role in public life: - Han China: Women were mostly limited to private, segregated spaces. - Imperial Rome: Women could go out to dinner and visit public baths.

Class and social hierarchy

Because the majority of primary sources about women's lives come from wealthy people, scholars don't always know how the lives of families living in poverty played out. However, we can deduce that there were differences between elite and common women. In Han China, the ability to keep a large household with lots of family members was highly valued, but this Confucian ideal was not possible for families with fewer economic resources who could only feed a limited number of people. Men with less money often sold their daughters as servants and kept their more valuable male children at home.

In Imperial Rome, women of different socioeconomic classes were distinguished by clothing style. Women with more socioeconomic power wore a long dress, or stola, and a loose coat, called a palla. They also wore ties in their hair. Prostitutes wore togas. If a woman of a higher socioeconomic class was found guilty of adultery, one of the punishments was to wear a toga. The distinction Imperial Roman society made between these two groups was not just a moral one; prostitutes and women of lower socioeconomic levels were also given fewer rights than women of a higher social status.

1. Broadly speaking, what did Daoism offer to women that Confucianism did not?
2. What are some possible differences between the way women were supposed to behave in Confucian rules vs. how they actually behaved?
3. What similarities did women in Han China and Imperial Rome have when it came to their economic power?
4. What is one way in which the lives of women in Han China were, broadly speaking, different from those of women in Imperial Rome?
5. How might the life of a woman living in poverty in Han China have differed from the life of a woman with many economic resources in the same time and place?