



Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang (Translations from the Asian Classics)

Anne Behnke Kinney

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When should a woman disobey her father, contradict her husband, or shape the policy of a ruler? According to the *Lienü zhuan*, or *Categorized Biographies of Women*, it is not only appropriate but necessary for women to offer counsel when fathers, husbands, sons, and rulers stray from virtue. The earliest Chinese text devoted to the moral education of women, the *Lienü zhuan* was compiled by Liu Xiang (79--8 B.C.E.) at the end of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.--9 C.E.) and recounts the deeds of both virtuous and wicked women. Informed by early legends, fictionalized historical accounts, and formal speeches on statecraft, the text taught generations of Chinese women to cultivate filial piety and maternal kindness and undertake such practices as suicide and self-mutilation to preserve chastity and reform wayward men. The *Lienü zhuan*'s stories inspired artists for a millennium and found their way into local and dynastic histories. An innovative work for its time, the text remains a critical tool for mapping women's social, political, and domestic roles at a formative time in China's development.

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