

# *Complaint from Wife --A Comparative Study Between Sogdian and Chinese Ancient Letters*

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**Abstract.** Previous research has studied Sogdian Ancient Letter No.3 discovered in Dunhuang to show that Sogdian women share a considerably high social status. However, there is still a lack of research on the reason behind this phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims to find out what caused differences in women's social status in different ancient civilizations. By comparing Sogdian Ancient Letters No.3 to Husband Joined the Army, a letter from the Qin Dynasty in ancient China, we discovered that the main difference between the two letters is the writers' attitude towards their husbands. Subsequently, we searched for and compared the restrictions for women in the two civilizations, and the results showed that the writers' attitude is largely correlated with the restrictions. While the restrictions in the Qin Dynasty were much stricter than those in Sogdian society, the writer from the Qin Dynasty showed relative cowardice towards her husband. This result reflected how restriction on women affected their status in marriage and in the whole society.

**Keywords:** Sogdian Ancient Letters, Women's Social Status, Comparative Study

## 1. Introduction

Women were commonly believed to suffer unfair treatment in society in ancient times. However, to historians' surprise, archaeological discoveries such as ancient Sogdian letters revealed that Sogdian women, especially aristocrats from the upper social class, tend to enjoy a considerably high social status. Some of them even have an equal status with their husband in marriage, and are able to control assets at home. On the contrary, scholars claimed that Chinese women from the Qin Dynasty had to strictly follow certain rules in marriage, including working from day to night at home without rest. So far, there have been few articles comparing women's social status in these two civilizations. This passage compares Sogdian Ancient Letters No.3 (313 CE)<sup>1</sup> to Husband Joined the Army (公子從軍, around 21 BC)<sup>2</sup>, a letter from the ancient Qin Dynasty. Although there is a large time span between these two letters, they are still comparable due to the following similarities. Both letters were written by wives to their husbands who were far away to express negative feelings, and both wives share a certain amount of power to control assets at home. However, the two letters are also completely different, considering the writers' attitude towards their husbands. This article tries to analyze these

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<sup>1</sup> This letter in the paper is based on Prof. Nicholas Sims-Williams's translation.

<sup>2</sup> The original text of this letter is the version used in Zhu Fenghan(朱凤瀚)'s paper A Further Study of the Qin Bamboo Slips "Gongzi Joins the Army" in the Peking University Collection(2017)

differences between the two letters and further explain how the distinct sociocultural background caused the differences.

## 2. Comparison

Sogdian Ancient Letter No.3 is written by Miwnay in Dunhuang to her husband Nanai-dhat, who is conducting trade in Central Asia. In the letter, Miwnay complained that she and her daughter “live wretchedly, without clothing, without money”[1], and she really hoped her husband could bring her back to Central Asia, but he didn’t.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Miwnay became quite angry with her husband, blaming him for not coming, and feeling regret for obeying his command. Similarly, Husband Joined the Army is written by Qian (牽) to her husband Gongzi to express her depressed feelings. Qian mentioned that she sent her husband far to the west, but what she received from her husband was extreme indifference (公子不肯棄一言半辭以居牽,牽去公子西行,心不樂,至死不可忘也)[2].<sup>4</sup> She was deeply hurt by this apathy and also greatly annoyed, criticizing her husband for being heartless (不仁). Additionally, both writers have a relatively high literary attainment compared with the average level of women in society. In ancient society, women were greatly restricted by the patriarchal system, the education monopoly, and gender ethics. It was quite rare for women to learn how to read and write, and they often lacked access to paper and pens as well. Therefore, these letters indicate that writers enjoy a relatively high social status. Miwnay and Qian both have certain power to control family property, especially when their husband were away. According to Sogdian Ancient Letter No.1, although Miwnay was living without money, she was still able to ask for a loan and live on charity[1]. In ancient times, particularly in Iran, Central Asia, and China, it was quite rare for women to have access to financial institutions and resources. However, Miwnay was able to receive economic resources in the form of social assistance, which indicated her aristocratic status. Similarly, in 公子從軍, Qian stated that she gave her husband five hundred coins to buy his own things (牽送公子錢五百,謂公子自以買)<sup>5</sup>. Judging from the husband's reluctant attitude towards receiving the money, the five hundred coins are not the common property of the couple, but rather Qian's private money[3]. These similarities revealed that the writers’ social class and the background and reasons for writing are all extremely alike, allowing the two letters to be compared and analyzed.

Although there are many similarities between the two letters, it is quite clear that Miwnay and Qian have different attitudes and emotions when blaming their husband. In Miwnay’s letter, she expressed extremely strong dissatisfaction towards her husband, claiming that she “would rather be a dog’s or a pig’s wife than his”[1]. Insulting her husband like this, Miwnay expressed pure anger in this letter. In addition, Miwnay also felt wronged and disappointed with her husband, because she went against the wishes of her parents and brothers and followed her husband's orders to come to Dunhuang, but her husband refused to take her and her daughter back. Hence, Qian also expressed great anger towards her husband. She questioned him, saying that it was fine if he didn't love her, but shouldn't he feel ashamed for being so unkind to her?<sup>6</sup> Yet, Qian’s letter mainly expressed the feeling of sadness and resentment. This letter is basically written on the background that Gongzi had been very cold towards Qian. Qian tried to win back her husband’s affection by sending him west to join the army. However, her husband refused to even offer a single word to comfort Qian, leaving her “unhappy” and deeply grief-stricken, to the point where she “could never forget it until his death.”[1]<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This can be found in Sogdian Ancient Letter No.1 and No.3.

<sup>4</sup> This sentence is in the third paragraph of Gongzi Joins the Army.

<sup>5</sup> Also in para. 4

<sup>6</sup> This original sentence is “今公子從(縱)不愛牽之身,獨不媿(懷)虜(乎).”

<sup>7</sup> The articles mentions that “心不樂,至死不可忘也,” expressing Qian’s unhappiness.

Through interpreting other historical documents, it can be concluded that this difference in attitudes and emotions is mainly influenced by sociocultural background, especially people's view of what women should be like in marriage.

### 3. Analysis

Miwnay and Qian showed different attitudes towards their husband in the letter, indicating that they also had different statuses in the marriage. While Miwnay dared to directly criticizing and insulting her husband, Qian was only able to euphemistically express sad feelings and dissatisfaction at her husband. Since both Miwnay and Qian represent a highly educated group of women<sup>8</sup>, this distinction indicates that Sogdian women enjoyed a relatively high status in marriage compared with Ancient Chinese women. Further research revealed that women in both societies have to follow certain restrictions in marriage. The terms in these regulations reflected public opinion on the social status of women, and therefore explained why wives in two societies have different performances. In the Sogdian Marriage Contract Nov. 3 and a marriage guarantee (Nov. 4) found on another site<sup>9</sup>, the husband Uttegin signed a formal contract with his wife, ensuring that he will treat Chata as a respected and beloved wife, providing her with food, clothing, and ornaments with respect and love. Additionally, Uttegin also claimed that he would have to give his wife compensation if he took other wives, concubines, or other females with him before leaving Chata without Chata's consent.<sup>10</sup> The bond accompanying the marriage contract also clearly defines the husband's obligations to his wife and family, making sure that he would not send his wife away for money or benefit[4]. The main purpose of these two marriage documents is to establish a mechanism to resolve the financial and legal obligations between the spouses under certain conditions. The contract clearly demonstrates that women's interests and rights were fully protected. Fundamental principles of marriage ensured equal and fair treatment for both parties. In the contract, if a husband married another woman without her consent, or took a concubine "to the displeasure of his wife," it would be defined as a crime punishable by compensation. Through the analysis of the contracts, it can be found that Sogdian women not only enjoyed extensive and high freedom in divorce, but also enjoyed freedom in their married life. In addition, there is no literature or record that these rights are specific to individual women or noble women, nor is there any evidence that these rights apply to women in other identities. Therefore, we believe that the rights in the contract examined apply to all free Sogdian women, at least in the pre-Islamic period[5].

In contrast to the idea of relative equality between men and women in the Sogdian marriage contract, another passage in the Qin Bamboo Slips from Peking University, Teaching Women (Jiaonv, 教女), strictly stipulated the obligations that women should fulfill and the rules they must follow in marriage<sup>11</sup>. This article reflected the roles that ancient Chinese women should undertake in marriage from both positive and negative aspects. The article mainly discussed two themes about women in marriage. First of all, a wife's temperament should be gentle and reserved, and she should also have a kind heart[6]. It was emphasized that wives should be gentle and peaceful in their conduct, prudent and kind in their behavior, and avoid showing signs of arrogance when interacting with others. They must be "cautious in not being hard-headed, and gentle in their hearts (慎毋刚气,和弱心肠)."[7]

8 There is in fact an argument about Qian's real identity. Some scholars believed that Qian is just common people because she could only give her husband 500 coins, which is a small amount of money. However, most other scholars, such as Pu Chenwei(蒲琛菁), thought that it is clear that Qian is different from most women at that time because she could enjoy certain freedom on economic issues. Qian may represent the unique image of a free woman in a period of social transformation.

9 The contents of Sogdian Marriage Contract Nov.3 used in the essay is the translation in Başak Kuzakçı's paper *Soğd Toplumunda Kadın Kimliği ve Temsilleri (MÖ VI.- MS VIII. Yüzyıl)* and Namazova Umida Normurodovna's paper *Marriage and Family Relations in Sogdian Society*.

10 The original passage mentioned that Uttegin would have to pay Chata 30 dirhams in Jiji or inferior currency.

11 The bamboo clips can be found in Zhu Fenghan's paper.

Secondly, this article intentionally creates a separation between men and women, strictly prescribing behavioral norms for interactions between men and women, thereby establishing a gender order where men are superior to women. The passage mentioned that the relationship between wife and husband is one of inner and outer, a yin-yang relationship(夫与妻,如表与里,如阴与阳)[7]. This clearly demonstrates the subservient relationship between women and men. Additionally, this passage also urges women to keep men's concerns in mind and always be willing to help them solve their problems(男子之卢(虑),臧(藏)之心肠。茆然更志,如发几(饥)梁).[7]<sup>12</sup> The article Teaching Women set forth requirements for female behavior, clearly defining "good women" and "bad women." A good woman should center herself on her husband's family and consider obedience to them a source of honor. While she could share household chores with her husband, she could not make decisions on her own. These behavioral requirements for women clearly reveal the Qin Dynasty's male-centered gender culture, and had already become the mainstream ideology of society before the spread of Confucianism. It should be noticed that when discussing the identity and status of women in Qin Dynasty gender relations, women were largely mere machines for labor and reproduction within marriage and were not given sufficient respect. In fact, the difference in women's status can also be seen in Miwnay's letter, where she complained that she and her daughter were forced to be "servants" of Chinese people, becoming shepherds of livestock. Miwnay thought that her work should have been related to business issues, but colonial Sogdian women were made to follow Chinese customs. In Han Dynasty China, women were subordinate to men and were expected to obey their wishes. Miwnay's husband's departure not only made life difficult for her but also prevented her from getting a divorce and returning to her parents' home. Without her husband's consent, she was unable to leave Dunhuang[5]. By analyzing these articles, it is clear to conclude that Sogdian women played a more significant role in marriage than wives in the Qin Dynasty. This difference in social status can therefore affect their behavior and attitudes toward their husband. While Sogdian women can argue with their husband on equal terms, women in the Qin Dynasty, who have relatively low status in marriage, were not allowed to express their dissatisfaction to their husbands in person, but could only grieve secretly.

#### 4. Conclusion

In sum, this article emphasizes analyzing the two letters to help reveal how sociocultural background can influence women's attitudes toward their husbands. Sogdian Marriage Contract and Teach Women are two strong evidence to show the rights and obligations of women in marriage. The former reflects that Sogdian women enjoy equal status with their husbands and can get compensation when their husbands make mistakes, while the latter reflects the various rules that Qin women need to strictly abide by, but there are few clauses to protect their rights. This conclusion may also encourage people to think deeper and uncover the origin, which might lie in social structure and political factors, that caused women's status in Sogdian and Ancient Chinese civilizations. Additionally, this article should not only be seen as a comparison between two ancient civilizations, but also inspire researchers to conduct in-depth research on the status of women in all ancient societies. In recent years, due to the continued inequality between men and women, many scholars have advocated for women's rights. Studying these ancient materials may help us find the reasons and cultural background for these phenomena, and therefore better achieve relative equality between men and women.

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<sup>12</sup> The classification of the content of the article "教女" refers to Xia Zengming's paper "The Peking University Qin Bamboo Slips "教女" and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Qin Dynasty".

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