

Inner support and outer alliances: the role of women in Bao Zheng's family and the maintenance of literati status in the Song Dynasty

Ting Han^{1}, Yanqing Xuan²*

¹School of Marxism, Anhui Medical University, Hefei, China

²School of Marxism, Anhui Agricultural University, Hefei, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 15716449577@126.com

Abstract. Research on Bao Zheng has long focused on his “Clear Sky” symbol and judicial practice, while the role of women in his family in shaping the “Filial and Solemn Family Tradition” and maintaining elite status has remained largely underexplored. This study centers on Bao Zheng’s wife, Ms. Dong, his eldest daughter-in-law, Ms. Cui, and the Wen couple, revealing the operational logic of Song dynasty elite families through their ethical practices and marriage networks. Ms. Dong, as a “virtuous internal helper,” leveraged household governance to transform internal family management into political-moral capital that enhanced Bao Zheng’s public image. Ms. Cui, as a “chaste and filial woman,” elevated her personal choices into a publicly lauded exemplar recognized by the state, serving as a moral symbol in the interaction between family and government. The Wen couple, through the continuation of the “filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law” model, ensured the stability of the Bao family’s core lineage both genetically and geographically. The role practices of these women intertwined with the strategic marital alliances of the Bao family with other prominent clans such as those of Lü Mengzheng and Wen Yanbo, jointly achieving the dual reproduction of ethical and social capital. The prestige of the Bao family was thus not merely the product of Bao Zheng’s personal morality but the outcome of collaborative ethical and social reproduction by family members. This case provides a micro-level perspective on the mechanisms sustaining elite families in the Song dynasty.

Keywords: Bao Zheng family, female roles, elite lineage, ethical practices, marriage networks

1. Introduction

Research on elite families of the Northern Song dynasty has long been a prominent field within Song history. Scholarly attention has traditionally focused on male-dominated public spheres such as the civil service examinations, the transmission of family learning, and clan organization, producing substantial findings. However, with the deepening of gender history and family history studies, the academic discourse has gradually moved beyond male-centered narratives. Peixia Yi, for instance, revealed the pivotal influence of Song dynasty women in the “inner quarters,” managing household property and orchestrating marriages to shape family fortunes. Wenli Bai’s study of social relations among the gentry in Wuzhou emphasized the central role of marital ties in constructing local elite status and facilitating vertical social mobility. Xiaonan Deng’s examination of the roles of elite wives further demonstrated that women were active participants and maintainers of internal family order and ethical norms. Collectively, these studies direct attention to the subtler dimensions of family history, forming a new paradigm for understanding Song social structure: the maintenance of elite lineages depended on the collaborative efforts of both male and female family members across public and private spheres [1-5].

As a model of clean governance in the Song dynasty, the Bao Zheng family has been celebrated for centuries, with Bao Zheng’s image solidifying into the male-centered “Clear Sky” symbol. While existing research touches on Bao Zheng’s filial conduct and family ethos, it seldom situates his family within this emerging paradigm. The contributions of women in his family are either only briefly mentioned or treated merely as annotations to filial ethics, lacking systematic or mechanistic analysis. In fact, under the fundamental social structure of “men manage the outside, women manage the inside,” the continuity of elite lineages depended not solely on men’s achievements in officialdom. Rather, lineage maintenance relied on the dual reproduction of ethical capital—embodied in family ethos—and social capital—embodied in marital alliances. The former concerns the family’s moral reputation and internal cohesion, while the latter provides external political connections and cultural prestige.

Women were the crucial agents in accomplishing both forms of reproduction. Through their roles as “internal supporters,” they managed household affairs, educated children, and upheld ethical norms; through “external connections,” they became the links connecting different gentry families, consolidating and expanding the family’s social network. Using the women of the Bao Zheng family as a lens, this study focuses on Bao Zheng’s wife, Ms. Dong, his eldest daughter-in-law, Ms. Cui, and the filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law Wen couple. By examining their ethical practices as “virtuous internal supporter,” “chaste and filial woman,” and “filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law,” the study explores how these women participated in constructing and maintaining the Bao family’s lineage through everyday ethical conduct. Their marital ties, in turn, served the Bao family’s strategic positioning within the Song gentry. A detailed investigation of these questions not only addresses the gendered lacuna in Bao Zheng scholarship but also provides a micro-level perspective on how elite families in the Song dynasty ensured long-term stability and intergenerational transmission of culture through the coordinated efforts of male and female members.

2. The virtuous internal supporter and the shaping of public image: the role practices of Ms. Dong

In the process of Bao Zheng’s rise from a filial son in his local community to a renowned minister of the Song dynasty, his wife, Ms. Dong, played a role far exceeding that of a conventional spouse. She was, in effect, the core architect and guardian of Bao Zheng’s public image. Her practice as a “virtuous internal supporter” effectively transformed the private virtues cultivated within the household into political-moral capital for Bao Zheng in both officialdom and society.

2.1. Filial care and the establishment of Bao Zheng’s reputation for filial piety

Bao Zheng was widely praised in his hometown for his filial devotion, and his conduct during the mourning period for his deceased parents laid the foundation for his moral reputation. According to the *History of Song (Song Shi)*, after passing the imperial examination, Bao Zheng resigned from office to care for his aging parents, remaining absent from official duties for ten years [6]. Even after their deaths, he “dwelt by their tombs, lingering without the heart to leave” [7]. While this decade-long retirement and period of filial mourning reflected Bao Zheng’s own sincere filial piety, the support of Ms. Dong was indispensable. In the *Epitaph of Ms. Dong*, Tian Zhang notes that she “returned early to serve the filial and solemn gentleman” and, during her thirteen years in the Bao household, “assisted him, tended to his needs, fulfilled her duties as a wife within the home, and maintained harmony with the clan outside” [8]. This account reveals that Ms. Dong not only personally served her in-laws, practicing filial duties within the household, but also managed complex family relationships, cultivating harmony and goodwill toward the family from the outside. By stabilizing the family order behind the scenes, she enabled Bao Zheng to devote himself fully to filial observances, thereby transforming his filial conduct into publicly recognized and concrete “acts of filial piety.” It can be said that Bao Zheng’s reputation as a filial son was a co-constructed achievement of husband and wife.

2.2. Integrity and the moral presentation of a united couple

Bao Zheng’s incorruptible administration and frugal lifestyle were also inseparable from Ms. Dong’s tacit cooperation. The *History of Song* records that “though honored, his clothing, utensils, and food remained as simple as those of commoners” [7]. The epitaph notes that even when Bao Zheng held high office, Ms. Dong and he “spent their days together, free of ostentation and extravagant pleasures, maintaining a simple and calm demeanor” [6]. A symbolically significant example occurred when Ms. Dong, having been ennobled as the Lady of Yongkang by imperial favor, entered the palace to offer thanks and “did not wear the official ceremonial robes” [8]. Even Empress Renzong expressed admiration: “This shows Bao Zheng did not seek undue favor!” The ceremonial attire signified status, and Ms. Dong’s deliberate disregard was not a breach of protocol, but rather a natural demonstration of the couple’s shared virtue and contentment with simplicity. Her modesty silently reinforced Bao Zheng’s public image as upright and selfless. In this way, Ms. Dong’s personal frugality extended and confirmed Bao Zheng’s moral integrity within his private life.

2.3. Household management, moral instruction, and the preservation of family reputation

After Bao Zheng’s death, Ms. Dong, as the family’s central figure, transformed from a “virtuous internal supporter” into the guardian of the family’s reputation. Internally, she “remained secluded, imposing as if a strict official,” maintaining family order with authority. At the same time, she cultivated her intellect by reading Buddhist texts “to suit her temperament and reason,” demonstrating the cultural cultivation expected of the matriarch of a gentry family. In managing family affairs, she balanced benevolence with discipline: “for relatives of the Bao household, she provided according to need; for matters not grounded in righteousness, she withheld entirely,” maintaining internal cohesion while upholding principles. Externally, she exhibited acute political judgment. When someone sought to manipulate Bao Zheng’s posthumous reputation through composing an epitaph, Ms. Dong decisively declined, stating, “It has already been deferred to Wu Kui” [8]. Recognizing the importance of the epitaph as a

form of “public historiography,” her decision prevented historical distortion and preserved Bao Zheng’s moral reputation. Through household management and moral instruction, Ms. Dong continued to secure the ethical standing of the Bao lineage after her husband’s passing.

Ms. Dong’s practice as a “virtuous internal supporter” demonstrates that women in elite families were far more than caretakers or educators. Through daily ethical practices, they effectively converted private virtues into the family’s moral capital in the public domain. This positioning exemplifies the critical role that elite wives played as mediators between “internal” and “external” spheres. Such a transformation not only shaped Bao Zheng’s public image but also contributed substantively to the construction and maintenance of the Bao family’s status, vividly illustrating how women leveraged household management to define and support their family’s reputation and position in the broader social world.

3. The chaste and filial woman and the interaction with state moral education: the historical image of Ms. Cui

The historical image of Bao Zheng’s eldest daughter-in-law, Ms. Cui, provides an exemplary case for studying the interaction between state power and family ethics. Her life trajectory clearly reveals the complex interplay among personal virtue, family obligations, and state-promoted moral instruction. The process by which her acts of filial chastity evolved from personal choice to public recognition by the imperial court can be seen as a typical historical instance in which women, through exemplary fulfillment of Confucian ethical duties, gained social recognition and discursive authority [9]. This interaction not only enhanced the social prestige of the Bao family but also served the state’s political objective of moral education, illustrating the co-constructive relationship between late imperial state power and family ethics in shaping female exemplars.

3.1. Vowing lifelong widowhood and the internalization of family ethics

At the age of nineteen, Ms. Cui married Bao Zheng’s eldest son, Bao Li, who died two years later; shortly afterward, her five-year-old son also passed away. As a young widow and bereaved mother, “her grief was profound” [6]. Out of concern, Bao Zheng and Ms. Dong even “considered that Cui might not be able to maintain mourning” [7] and allowed her to remarry if she wished, reflecting a tolerant attitude consistent with the relatively flexible notions of chastity in the early Northern Song period [10]—as evidenced by the remarriage of Fan Zhongyan’s mother [11] and Wang Anshi’s arrangements for his daughter-in-law [12]. Yet confronted with this choice, Ms. Cui declared: “My father-in-law is a renowned man of the realm. Though I am of humble birth, it is my fortune to serve him; how could I dishonor the family? In life I am a Bao daughter-in-law, in death a Bao ghost; I vow never to marry again” [7]. This statement skillfully linked her personal commitment to chastity with the protection of Bao Zheng’s reputation as a “renowned man of the realm.” Rather than passively accepting ritual constraints, she actively internalized the honor of the Bao family as her highest value. Her refusal to remarry not only stabilized Bao Zheng’s late-life household but also embodied the extreme rigor of the “Filial and Solemn Family Tradition,” serving as a living testament to the ethical ideals of traditional society.

3.2. Raising orphans and ensuring the continuity of the family line

Ms. Cui’s most crucial contribution to the Bao family lay in raising Bao Zheng’s younger son, Bao Shou (originally named Bao Xian), born to a concubine, whose existence Bao Zheng initially did not know. Ms. Cui “secretly cared for the child, ensuring proper attention,” and after Bao Li’s death, she “took the child into her household, naming him Xian, and raised him as her own” [7]. Beyond fulfilling maternal responsibilities, she “oversaw his education to adulthood” and arranged “a suitable marriage for him,” completing the major rites of social reproduction [6]. At a critical moment when the Bao lineage faced a potential decline of its direct male line, Ms. Cui single-handedly ensured the continuity of the family’s bloodline and ancestral rites. While later literary accounts of the “sister-in-law” story may be apocryphal, the emotional core derives from this historical episode. Her actions preserved the Bao family’s core lineage both biologically and socially, a contribution that merits the highest recognition.

3.3. Imperial commendation and the generation of moral symbols

Ms. Cui’s filial chastity soon transcended her family, entering the state’s moral gaze. When her mother, Ms. Lü, pressured her to remarry [7], Ms. Cui resisted with the statement: “If I cannot follow my will, I shall return as a corpse to the Bao household,” ultimately winning her father’s consent [6]. Upon returning to the Bao family, she simultaneously raised Bao Zheng’s younger son and cared for her mother-in-law, Ms. Dong. “When Madam was ill, she did not leave her side, nor did she personally prepare medicine or food without permission” [8]. This combination of resisting parental pressure, honoring her deceased husband, and caring for her in-laws drew the attention of local officials. Zhang Tian, the prefect of Luzhou, personally composed a biographical account, which was later included in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women in the History of Song* (Song Shi).

Ultimately, Emperor Zhezong issued an edict commending her as the Lady of Shou'an County, with the text, written by Su Shi, praising her: "Though widowed and bereft of children, yet able to vow lifelong widowhood and care for the orphaned and weak, you have ensured the establishment of the descendants of a meritorious minister. ... Let this example spread throughout the counties, so that those lax in filial piety may feel ashamed" [13]. The edict explicitly linked "caring for the orphaned and weak" to the continuation of a renowned minister's lineage, revealing the political intent behind imperial commendation: to recognize Ms. Cui's filial chastity while simultaneously promoting the ideological unity of loyalty and filial piety. In this process, Ms. Cui transformed from a woman practicing family ethics into a moral symbol within the imperial educational and ideological system. In later generations, her former residence became the site of the "Platform of Chaste Women," rebuilt in the Yuan dynasty as the "Shangjie Tower" [14], marking the integration of her image into the historical memory of local moral education.

Ms. Cui's case illustrates the intricate interaction between personal virtue and state moral education. Her acts of filial chastity—from personal choice to imperial commendation—reflect the mutual reinforcement of family ethics and state ideology. This interaction not only elevated the Bao family's social prestige but also exemplified the role of elite families as intermediaries linking individuals to the state.

4. The filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law and the consolidation of the family core: the role functions of Wen Xiao and his wife

In the history of the Bao family, the roles of Bao Zheng's second daughter and her husband, Wen Xiao, are often overlooked by researchers. A close examination of their actions reveals that, following the successive deaths of Bao Zheng and Ms. Dong, this couple assumed a pivotal role in consolidating the family core and maintaining the continuity of the lineage. Their decisions and actions—settling in Hefei, supporting the young heir, and managing family affairs—illustrate a distinctive model in which members of gentry families intervene through marital ties to stabilize family fortunes.

4.1. Overseeing funeral rites and assuming family responsibilities

In the seventh year of Jiayou (1062), Bao Zheng passed away in the capital. According to the *History of Song (Song Shi)*, the court paid special attention to his funeral and "appointed Wen Xiao, as Baixin Military Commissioner and Judicial Officer, to oversee the transport of the coffin back home" [15], entrusting Wen Xiao with the crucial responsibility of returning the body. The epitaph of Bao Zheng records: "He had two daughters, one married Wang Xiang, Prefectural Clerk of Xia County in Shanzhou, the other married Wen Xiao, Prefectural Clerk of the National University" [6]. Wang Xiang, also an accomplished scholar, was contemporary with Su Shi, Su Zhe, and Zeng Gong; the Wang family famously produced four successive scholars across two reigns. However, Wang Xiang died young, and Bao Zheng's eldest daughter also passed away early [16], likely explaining why the epitaph emphasizes Wen Xiao and his wife's role in escorting the coffin. With the eldest son Bao Li deceased and the youngest son Bao Shou still a child, Wen Xiao, as a son-in-law, was entrusted with this responsibility, highlighting his special position of trust within the family. The ritual act of overseeing the funeral not only represented filial devotion to his father-in-law but also symbolized the assumption of family responsibilities and the continuation of the Bao lineage.

4.2. Settling in Hefei and strengthening local connections

After the funeral, Wen Xiao and his wife made a decision with long-term implications: "they settled in Hefei to live with their mother-in-law" [14]. As a scholar-official, Wen Xiao could have accompanied his wife to her official postings or returned to his native region, but the couple chose to remain in the Bao family's ancestral home. This decision provided crucial support during Ms. Dong's widowhood and Bao Shou's minority, maintaining family stability and preserving the Bao family's local social network. It ensured the continuity of Bao Zheng's direct lineage in their native place, reinforcing the family's local reputation. Historical evidence confirms the enduring significance of this choice: during the Southern Song period, when Jin forces invaded the south and burned the Bao residence, "the Bao and Wen families jointly sought refuge in rural areas, forming today's Wenji and Dabaocun settlements" [14]. This coordinated resettlement demonstrates the long-term impact of their decision.

4.3. Caring for the mother-in-law and extending family ethics

The couple's life in Hefei exemplified the ethical practice of the "filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law." Wen Xiao's wife displayed utmost filial devotion: "When Madam was ill, she did not leave her side, nor did she personally prepare medicine or food without permission" [15], mirroring Ms. Cui's earlier care for Ms. Dong and creating a vivid image of Bao family women collectively practicing filial piety. Wen Xiao himself was deeply involved; upon Ms. Dong's death, he "managed the affairs, stating that Madam had been treated with the utmost respect and it was fitting to compile an epitaph, and he did not refuse" [8]. He personally oversaw the funeral and invited Zhang Tian, a close associate of Bao Zheng, to compose the epitaph. This

expression of filial devotion, extending beyond bloodlines, not only preserved the family's moral reputation but also ensured the continuity of ethical traditions during the formative years of Bao Zheng's direct heirs.

4.4. Supporting the young heir and ensuring the family's future

Another key contribution of Wen Xiao and his wife was their support for Bao Shou. At the time, Bao Shou was still a child, and Wen Xiao and Ms. Cui "assisted the mother-in-law and raised the child as their own" [15]. This meticulous nurturing went far beyond ordinary marital obligations, functioning as a strategic effort to secure the family's future. As the sole surviving son of Bao Zheng, Bao Shou's growth and eventual success directly affected the continuation of the Bao lineage. Wen Xiao and his wife's careful upbringing ensured that the core bloodline of the Bao family was educated and prepared to sustain the family's legacy, laying a solid foundation for Bao Shou to "carry on the family line" [17]. This phenomenon, in which a son-in-law intervenes in his father-in-law's household, was not unique in Song gentry networks; it reflects the relative flexibility of family boundaries and the rational circulation of talent within marital networks.

Marriage alliances could serve as stabilizing forces in times of crisis. Through geographical permanence, ethical continuity, and support of the bloodline, Wen Xiao and his wife maintained the cohesion of the family core at a critical moment. Their deep engagement illustrates the flexible mechanisms by which gentry families in the Song dynasty adapted to potential threats, extending the lifecycle and resilience of elite lineages.

5. Marriage networks and strategies for maintaining gentry lineages

The maintenance of gentry families was highly strategic and flexible. The Song dynasty gentry constituted a status group continuously reproduced through multiple forms of capital, including success in the imperial examination, marital alliances, and family culture. The Bao family's marital choices were not merely dictated by social parity; they reflected a deliberate strategy for family development. Through these intersecting marriage networks, the Bao family gradually carved out its space for survival and advancement within the complex political and social structures of the Song dynasty.

5.1. Establishing political alliances

The Bao family's marriage map is particularly notable for its alliances with prominent officials of the time. The marriage of Bao Shou, the second son, to the daughter of Wen Yanbo exemplifies a highly strategic move. Wen Yanbo served under four reigns and held both military and civil offices; he shared examination connections and longstanding social ties with Bao Zheng. Bao Shou's promotion to the position of Shaofu Jiancheng was directly facilitated by Wen Yanbo's recommendation, citing Bao Shou's ability to "preserve the family line, remain composed and self-restrained, and not seek advancement recklessly" [17]. This marriage not only provided Bao Shou with political support but also integrated the Bao family into the broader political network centered on Wen Yanbo. (Bao Zheng and Wen Yanbo, along with Han Qi and Wu Yu, were examination contemporaries; Han Qi's grandson married Wen Yanbo's granddaughter, Wen Yanbo's son married Wu Chong's daughter, and Wu Yu also served as chancellor.) Moreover, the elder daughter-in-law Cui's connection with the Lü Mengzheng family added political depth to the Bao lineage. Though Cui was not Lü Mengzheng's direct granddaughter, her mother hailed from the "family of the former prime minister Wen Mu Gong" [6], establishing another layer of political association. While Bao Zheng himself was renowned for his uprightness and avoided factionalism, maintaining family status remained a guiding principle for marriage alliances in a society structured around privilege and hierarchy. These marital networks objectively provided necessary buffering and protection for the Bao family within the treacherous officialdom while adhering to the contemporary norm of social parity in marriage.

5.2. Sustaining cultural prestige

"From the Five Dynasties onward, scholar selection disregarded family background, and marriage disregarded lineage" [18]. "Aligning with shifts in political structures and social mobility, selecting a spouse based on talent became a critical standard for elite families" [19]. The Bao family likewise emphasized the accumulation of cultural prestige through marital alliances. The selection of two sons-in-law is particularly illustrative: both hailed from distinguished gentry families. Wang Xiang came from the Yingzhou Wang family, renowned for producing four successful examination candidates in one generation, while Wen Xiao also emerged from a gentry background and passed the imperial examination. Such alliances with culturally elite families significantly enhanced the Bao family's social standing. The marriage choices of subsequent generations continued this pattern: Bao Yongnian's daughters married locally distinguished men—one "to Lai Chizheng, a notable scholar of the same county" and the other "to Wen Guan, a notable scholar of Lujian County, Wuwei." The epitaphs specifically emphasized that "both sons-in-law were renowned for their talent" [6], reflecting the family's long-term strategy of sustaining cultural capital and social reputation through carefully selected marital alliances.

5.3. Consolidating local networks

While cultivating high-level political alliances, the Bao family also maintained strong local ties in Hefei. From Wen Xiao and his wife settling in Hefei to Bao Shou's daughters marrying "the sons of local officials such as Zhang Gong" [6], and further alliances of Bao Yongnian's daughters with local gentry, the Bao family actively managed its regional network. This multi-layered strategy aligns with the typical survival model of Song gentry families: central alliances provided political resources and prestige, while local marriages reinforced the family's social foundation. The concurrent formation of Wenji and Dabaocun settlements serves as material evidence of the strategy's success. By rooting themselves locally, the Bao family maintained resilience and continuity despite political turbulence or dynastic changes.

In sum, the Bao family's marriage network constituted a multi-tiered, comprehensive mechanism for lineage preservation. Political alliances offered protection, cultural alliances ensured prestige continuity, and local alliances consolidated social foundations. This three-dimensional marital strategy extended beyond traditional concerns of social parity to demonstrate the gentry's long-term planning and adaptability. Through women's roles in domestic management and external networking—embodied in the practices of Ms. Dong and Ms. Cui, and in alliances with central officials such as Wen Yanbo and scholarly families like the Wang lineage—the Bao family effectively managed its moral reputation, political alliances, and cultural image, thereby securing its position and continuity within the Song dynasty gentry.

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the roles of women and the marriage networks in the Bao family, a multi-dimensional picture of the family emerges, surpassing the conventional "Blue Sky" (Qingtian) symbol of Bao Zheng. The maintenance of Song dynasty gentry lineages was essentially a systematic project requiring intergenerational effort, cooperation between men and women, and coordination of internal and external spheres. In this context, figures such as Ms. Dong, Ms. Cui, and the couple Wen Xiao and his wife are no longer marginal characters in historical records; they were key architects of the family's shared fate.

The vitality of gentry families relied on the continuous reproduction of two core forms of capital: ethical capital embodied in family ethos ("jiafeng") and social capital mediated through marital alliances. Ms. Dong, through her daily practice as a "virtuous wife," transformed the family's internal virtue into Bao Zheng's political and moral reputation. Ms. Cui, through the extreme enactment of filial chastity, elevated personal choice into a culturally recognized symbol endorsed by imperial authority. The couple Wen Xiao and his wife, through their role as "filial daughter and virtuous son-in-law," intervened at critical moments to stabilize the family core. These female practices, in conjunction with the Bao family's strategic marital alliances with prominent families such as Wen Yanbo, Lü Mengzheng, and the Wang lineage, collectively constructed a solid foundation for the continuation of the Bao lineage.

The Bao family case demonstrates that understanding Song gentry society requires moving beyond the traditional narrative focused solely on male achievement. Instead, it should be regarded as a social reproduction system jointly managed by male and female members, reliant on multiple forms of capital. Focusing on the women of the Bao family allows for a dialogue with the research paradigms proposed by scholars such as Yi Peixia, Bai Wenli, and Deng Xiaonan, and opens the door to further reflection. For families like Bao Zheng's, whose standing was rooted in moral integrity and social prestige, women's ethical practices constituted a form of core political action. As a fundamental social unit, the family operates as an integrated system, and the moral ethos maintained by its women formed the most crucial ethical armor and intangible asset for the family within a complex political environment.

The "internal assistance" of women and the "external linkage" of marital alliances were by no means marginal footnotes of history; they were foundational to the political culture of the gentry. Re-centering these stories not only responds to the academic call to "bring women back into history" and restores historical richness, but also, through a gendered analytical lens, reveals the deeper ethical logic and social dynamics underpinning imperial Chinese society. In this dimension, historical resilience is often hidden in seemingly ordinary marital choices, everyday ethical practices, and family responsibilities that transcend bloodlines.

Funding project

Anhui Bao Gong Research Center General Project: "The Image of Bao Gong in Modern Media: Symbol Evolution, Narrative Adjustment, and Communication Challenges" (bgj2025yb-9).

References

- [1] Ip, P. H. (2010). *Nei wei: Marriage and life of women in the Song dynasty*(Z. Hong, Trans.). Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- [2] Bai, W. L. (2015). *Power relations: Family, status, and state in Song China*(Y. J. Liu, Trans.). Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- [3] Deng, X. N. (Ed.). (2003). *Women and society in the Tang and Song dynasties*. Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House.

- [4] Du, F. Q., & Wang, Z. (Eds.). (2015). *Women and gender in Chinese history*. Tianjin People's Publishing House
- [5] Li, Z. D. (2009). *New essays on Chinese history: Gender volume*. Lianjing Publishing House.
- [6] Bao, Z. (1999). *Collected works of Bao Zheng*(G. Y. Yang, Ed.). Huangshan Publishing House. (Original work published in Song dynasty)
- [7] Tuo, T., et al. (1977). *History of the Song dynasty: Biography of Bao Zheng*(Vol. 10315). Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work published in Yuan dynasty)
- [8] Anhui Provincial Museum. (1980). Excavation report of the Northern Song Bao Zheng family tombs at Daxingji, eastern suburbs of Hefei. *Cultural Relics Materials Series*(p. 160). Cultural Relics Press.
- [9] Mann, S. (1997). *Precious records: Women in China's long eighteenth century*. Stanford University Press.
- [10] Yang, X. R. (2001). Research on Bao Zheng's case-handling stories. *Fudan Journal (Social Sciences Edition)*, (2), 133–136.
- [11] Fan, Z. Y. (2002). *Complete works of Fan Zhongyan*(p. 798). Sichuan University Press.
- [12] Wei, T. (1983). *Dongxuan notes*(Vol. 7, p. 77). Zhonghua Book Company. (Original work published in Song dynasty)
- [13] Zhang, C. L. (1999). *Complete works of Su Shi: Vol. 2*(p. 899). China Literature and History Publishing House.
- [14] Hefei Local Chronicles Compilation Committee Office. (2012). *Hefei local chronicles: Vol. 2*. Fangzhi Publishing House.
- [15] Kong, F. M. (1986). *Chronology of Bao Zheng*(p. 139). Huangshan Publishing House.
- [16] Yin, J. L., & Shen, H. L. (2023). "One family, four jinshi": Biographical study of Wang Xiang and his sons, sons-in-law of Bao Zheng in the Northern Song. *Journal of Fuyang Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (1), 7–12.
- [17] Shen, L. (Ed.). (2011). *Chronology of Wen Yanbo*(p. 316). Bashu Publishing House.
- [18] Zheng, Q. (1988). *Tongzhi: Vol. 25*(p. 439). Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House. (Original work published in Song dynasty)
- [19] Yao, Z. Y. (2002). On the marriage selection standards of Northern Song aristocratic families. *Gansu Social Sciences*, (6), 52–55, 59.