

Reconstructing Gendered Knowledge: Women's Education and Neo-Confucian Revival during the Qianjia Period

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Abstract: The revival of the Neo-Confucian thought (1736-1795) had a powerful impact on the system of knowledge and education especially regarding gender. Although women played a very significant role in transferring cultural values, literature has largely failed to point out all their roles in the educational reform of this era. Such a historiographical gap restricts our knowledge of Neo-Confucian idealism in terms of gender roles and the intellectual contribution of women. This paper tries to recreate gender knowledge as viewed through an examination of the education of women in the Qianjia era within the movement of the Neo-Confucian revival. This study uses a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, utilizing secondary sources of information from educational books, personal notes, and historical writings. Crucial observations are made with references to the fact that even though the Qianjia period simply reinforced existing gender roles, it still permitted subtle types of intellectual activities on the part of women, especially holding on to and transmitting Neo-Confucian teachings. Education of women, although restricted, became a domain of struggle and bargaining where intellectual spaces were born that conditioned slightly gendered knowledge generation. The contribution made by this study to the overall discussion where gender, education, and Confucianism meet has implications when it comes to explaining historical and modern gender interests in East Asia. The results demonstrate the difficulty of recognizing the status of women in education in the Neo-Confucian setting, and they call into question any straightforward interpretation of gendered intellectual history.

Keywords: Women's Education, Neo-Confucianism, Qianjia period, Reconstruction, Knowledge.

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1. Introduction

A turning point in the revival process of Neo-Confucianism is the Qianjia period (1736-1795) of the Qing dynasty, during which Emperor Qianlong reigned. Neo-Confucianism was based on moral philosophy, social order, and hierarchy, making it the ideological framework of the Qing government and society (Hoson, 2024). It was based on some of its major tenets, which included the strengthening of gendered norms, particularly in the field of education, where the role of women was often reduced to the domestic, in-house sphere. Notwithstanding, the Qianjia period was marked by the re-awakening of Confucian education ideals, which had profound implications not just on the education of men but also on the access to education for women (Maychuk et al., 2024). Even though the nineteenth-century deep-seated patriarchy did not allow neglecting women's education entirely, there is a very intricate debate relating to the positions of women in the intellectual and academic fields.

Although the gendered contexts of such progressions have been mostly ignored, the male-oriented discursive account of the Qianjia situation is well documented and notable. Historians have mainly paid attention to how Neo-Confucianism shaped male intellectuals because it played an important role in consolidating state power and standardizing men's education (Yü, 2016). Consequently, the learning experiences and intellectual acts of women at that time are under-investigated. The larger question is that no scholarly focus seemed to give ample consideration to the representation of the schools of thought on gender, education, and Neo-Confucianism, which remains the dominant piece of scholarly discourse. The contribution of women towards the development and change of knowledge is usually sidelined, and the role played in the intellectual and educational life of women has been overlooked.

This paper focuses on the impact that the Neo-Confucian revival in the 18th century and more precisely the Qianjia period had on women's education and intellectualism. The researched objective is to overview of the gendered aspects of the educational activities of the time basing on the written works available at that time. It examines how women came to encounter Neo-Confucian ideology, either through the actions of acquiescence or resistance. This paper creates a more holistic view of the educational topography of the Qianjia period, which focuses on the female agency in terms of the propagation and negotiation of knowledge. It illuminates how women enabled, adapted, and in some instances resisted the Neo-Confucian revival, filling in the historiographical gap of the history of Qing intellectuals and the history of women. It also leaves some insight into the position of women in the education system and changes to culture in the Qianjia period.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gendered Education in Neo-Confucian Thought

Educational training and gender relationships in China were marked by the influence of Neo-Confucianism, which grew out of the Song dynasty (Li, 2025). Striving to become a prevalent intellectual movement, Neo-Confucianism grew into a dominant intellectual movement both under the Ming and the Qing dynasties. To the Neo-Confucian thinkers, education did not only serve as a medium through which one received knowledge, but it was also viewed as a method of developing good character, and it strengthened social roles (Deardorff, 2023). The desire to stress hierarchy and moral requirements of individuals in the family and the whole society implied that gendered education became a part of the Confucian

ideal. Men, the intellectuals and the rulers, were perceived to be given the greatest emphasis on intellectual education as opposed to women, who were supposed to dwell in domestic virtues and duties as mothers and wives. This reliance on gendered duality in education was the most crucial aspect of the Neo-Confucian perception of the world, which has been intertwined with the concept of social order (Tan, 2020). Although the women were supposed to gain knowledge concerning household, filial piety, and moral virtue, men had more formal intellectual studies, such as the study of classical texts, administration, and moral philosophy. This inevitably led to female education being treated as a subsidiary to men and intellectual success among females being considered either a product of virtuous accomplishment or a means of support by family members (Pan & Tan, 2024). The Neo-Confucian ideal thus strengthened conventional gender roles where women were equated with the realm of the informal education system that made male scholars and officials.

Based on the impact of Neo-Confucianism on gendered learning, it is apparent that the strict segregation of intellectuals' roles between men and women was aimed at upholding societal stratification. Men are ready to enter academic studies, but women were used to study only in the home environment, and it was devoted to values concerning the family. As the Qianjia period restored Confucianism ideals, such a classical education model began experiencing some slight modifications. The second section addresses the ways that these changes affected the role of women in the intellectual and social life of the Qing dynasty.

2.2. Women's Education during the Qing Dynasty

This consolidation of Neo-Confucian ideals in civilization occurred in the Qing dynasty, especially during the time of the emperor Qianlong in the 18th century. As formal education of men was still thriving, the education of women experienced some minor transformations (Russell, 2023). The Qianlong era can be characterized by the cultural revival, involving not only the maintenance and encouragement of the Confucian ideals, but also the emergence of new intellectual achievements (Shao et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this was also the time when there was a rise in the education of women, as more women were becoming accessible to literary education in some of the private educational centers. The Qing dynasty enforced the educational divide between men and women in many ways, although during this period, there also emerged female literacy and the development of a small but prestigious grouping of women intellectuals (Zhong, Tingting, & Jie, 2016). Affluent families started to see the importance of educating females to run a house more efficiently, as well as to maintain family dignity through their literacy skills. Many women of the period, especially those with cultured family backgrounds, could approach classical literature, though much of the time such studies were done under the guidance of a male member of the family (Humphreys, 2023). Such education, however, was buried in the usual way in the closets of individuals, and the products of their thinking usually remained poetry, letters, and the house manuals.

2.3. Women Intellectuals and Gendered Knowledge

Among the most important factors of the correlation of women's education and Neo-Confucianism in the course of the Qianjia period is the inference of women scholars (Hominh, Nguyen, & Ho, 2024). Despite women had little access to formal scholarly institutions, a substantial number of women, and especially those in the elite families or scholar-official families, worked on their intellectual activities in unofficial contexts. Other of these women were poetry writers, philosophical tract authors, and moral philosophical discoursing commentators, and were able to struggle with the same intellectual movements in which male

scholars were living (Schultz, 2023). A few women thinkers, like the great scholar and poet Wei Zhi (who lived in the early Qing), were known because of their literary and intellectual contributions (Zhirong, 2024). Such women were frequently praised in their family structures or by their neighbors because of their skills of voicing in to present the moral principles and philosophical concepts. Their intellectual activity, albeit, was all too often filtered through into Confucian morality, and their works were typically intended to become models of moral behaviour, with far less emphasis being on the independent act of scholarship.

2.4. Neo-Confucian Revival in the Qianjia Period

This is very prominent during the Qianjia or Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty, which is characterized by Neo-Confucian intellectuals who clashed with previously held traditional Confucian values. During this era, there was a consolidation of Confucian ideals of morality and social stability, and these strengthened gender divisions and the hierarchical structure of the society (Ji, 2024). The neo-Confucianism of the Qianjia period has had enormous influence on the state policies, educational changes, and the atmosphere of that period (Hui, 2025). Neo-Confucianism persisted through the Qianjia period with far-reaching consequences on educational provisions for women. On one hand, Confucian morality was reasserted and gave an affirmation that assigned women and men with gender specific roles, thus restricting women in their intellectual and educational field (Cao, 2022). Conversely, on the other hand, there were also those women who were at least intellectually equipped by the intellectual environment of the time, who were allowed to interact with Confucianism, though within the confines of the patriarchal hierarchy. The tradition of women as moral educators in the family was put in the forefront of the Neo-Confucian worldview, where the priority of domesticity and filial piety toward their roles were most important to women. Here, the analysis of women's education in the Qianjia era shows that it can dissect the role of gender and the intellectual tradition together with cultural transformation in a distinctive manner (Jia, 2023). How women negotiated or fought against the Neo-Confucian revival can tell us a great deal about the adaptability and strength of gendered knowledge as part of the more general social and intellectual changes of the era.

2.5. Gap in Literature

The current literature almost completely aims at male reforms in education in Qing instead of looking at the gendered aspects of education for women. The gap in the knowledge there was a major lack of understanding of how women responded to, participated in, or went against Neo-Confucian ideals in the educational structure. This dislocation does not consider the contribution of women intellectuals and their part in the transfer of gendered knowledge in the Qianjia period, a field that should be researched.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Method

In this paper, a qualitative research approach was employed to examine how the revival of Neo-Confucianism influenced gendered knowledge in women's education during the Qianjia period. The study examined secondary sources from a historical and interpretive perspective, including education, Confucius' writings, and historical accounts. The question to be addressed is how the combination of gender, education, and Neo-Confucianism philosophy did affect the shape of women's education position and intellectual paradigms.

The qualitative approach is selected because of its ability to conduct in-depth analysis of historical literature and provide a holistic picture of what was happening to the socio-cultural aspects during that era of Qianjia period.

3.2. Research Design

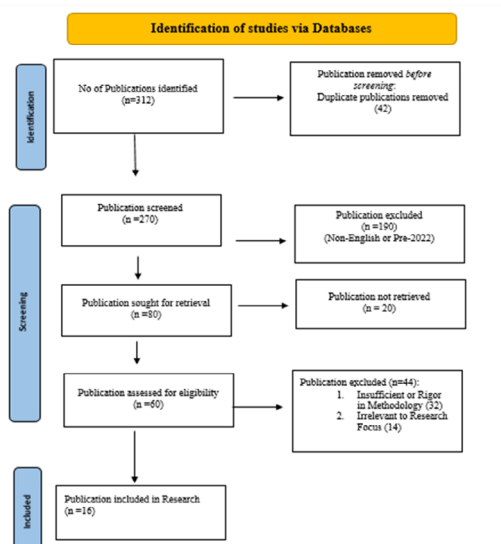
A qualitative approach with a Systematic literature review (SLR) of the available literature on women's education and Neo-Confucian revival in the Qianjia period is central to this study. By methodically gathering, comparing, and contrasting both primary and secondary historical materials and authoring secondary analyses of these materials, the SLR approach has given attention to gender, education, and Confucian thought. The strategy enables transparency and replicability that identifies the significant themes, gaps, and insights on how Neo-Confucianism impacted the educational role of women in the Qianjia era. It is a chewy exercise in topic exploration.

3.3. PRISMA Framework

According to the best practice recommendation for systematic reviews, the study applied the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) checklist. The model renders the process of the review transparent, systematic, and repeatable. Through the PRISMA, the study selected, analyzed, and systematically identified the relevant literature. The PRISMA guidelines provide a clear procedure for extracting and analyzing data, ensuring consistency and clarity in the ultimate reporting of findings.

3.4. Data Collection

Figure 1: The PRISMA Framework for the Selection of Studies for Analysis.



The data that would be utilized by this research comes in the form of peer-reviewed scholarly journals, namely Google Scholar, Web of Science, and JSTOR. The literature search includes studies that have been published between 2015-2025, to include the most topical and recent research. The essential sources were the sources on women education, Neo-Confucianism, and gendered knowledge of research articles, case studies,

and theoretical works during the Qianjia period. This literature gives a clear insight into the Neo-confucian influence on the educational roles of women and gendered knowledge systems in this period.

A total of 312 studies were found. Once we eliminated duplicates ($n = 42$), we looked at the titles and abstracts of the 270 remaining papers. As a result, 190 articles were left out because they did not fit the criteria, leaving 80 full-text articles for the next review step. 44 papers were removed from the list since they missed the focus on motivation or did not match the criteria. Out of 36 papers, 20 were excluded because they were not retrieved. In the end, 16 reliable studies were chosen for the final assessment.

3.5. Inclusion Criteria

The articles used in the study are related to the topic of women's education, Neo-Confucianism as well as the gendered knowledge in the period of Qianjia. Only peer-reviewed publications in English between 2015 and 2025 were analyzed. The literature must specifically focus on the effects that the Neo-Confucian Ideology had on the education of women, policy on education, and the construction of gendered knowledge. The studies that have a major contribution to understanding these topics were included in the review.

3.6. Exclusion Criteria

Studies that were deemed irrelevant were excluded from the analysis. This includes studies that focus on unrelated fields, policy areas outside of education, or those that do not specifically address discourse and framing approaches. Research sources of the grey literature, unpublished dissertations, and reports were not used. Also, research conducted in any language other than English or conducted before 2015 was not included unless the study is in English and is of high relevance to the topic.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The focus of ethics in research is based on the utilization of data from published academic sources in this study. All the studies taken up were cited fully, and adequate credit were given to the authors of the original research. The review made sure that both the literature and findings are ethical according to research standards given and that the findings are presented in such a manner that it is not infringe on the intellectual property of the original authors. There is no direct involvement of human subjects in the research since it uses only secondary data available in open sources.

3.8. Finding and Analysis

The main points on the history of Neo-Confucian revival and women's education in the period of Qianjia were examined in the analysis. Such key issues as the influence of Confucianism on educational options available to women, the inclusion of gendered knowledge in systems of education, and the social consequences of such educational systems were part of the focal point of the analysis. The analysis of educational literature, books of Confucius, and their impact on the place of women in society are also among the most important areas. The results pointed out what has worked thus far in influencing educational practices, the obstacles met by the women, and the areas that require deeper probing or betterment.

3.9. Selected Studies for Analysis

The literature review is grounded on a subset of the studies that take the roles of the inclusion

criteria in the PRISMA guidelines. Studies have been chosen due to their methodological focus and alignment with the topic of the research in the history of the study that concerns women and education Qianjia era. The selected works are critiqued based on the role of Neo-Confucianism thoughts on informing the education roles of women, the construction of gendered knowledge, and its cultural implications of these educational practices. Studies that offer a critical look at the implementation of Neo-Confucian ideals in education and how these ideals have modelled the role of women in society were of special interest. The chosen works provide the most detailed information about the interplay of gender, education, and Confucianism in this era.

Table 1: Summary of Key Studies on Confucianism, Gender, and Women's Education.

Citation	Aim	Findings	Codes
(Tan, 2019)	Questioning gender social convention: learning toward Confucian classic	Examines the impact of Confucian classics on the gender practices of education	Confucianism, gender norms, education
(Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023)	Women in Chinese society: doctoring Confucianism, confusion emergence and the opportunity to take up higher education	Assesses how Confucianism has affected the access of Chinese women to higher education.	Confucianism, education, women empowerment
(Sintionean, 2020)	Appropriation of Confucian thoughts in women education.	Exploring Confusion ideas in education.	Modernization, education and Confusianism
(Lee, 2018)	Feminist issue with the notion of harmony: A Confucian view	Opinions Believes Confucianism about harmony as relates to feminism.	Feminism, Confucianism, gender theory
(Kang, 2017)	Women, Gender and Religion in Modern China: An Introduction	Discusses gender and religious lives in early 20 th century China.	Gender, religion, modern China
(Zhang, 2021)	Invention of tradition and indigenization of modernity: the Beijing New Women and their leisure in the early decades of 18th century	Explores the aspect of women working to influence the contemporary Chinese culture in the 18th century.	Women, modernity, and education
(Goodman, 2018)	Gender, cosmopolitanism, transnational space, and the education of girls	Examines the role of cosmopolitanism to the secondary education of girls.	Cosmopolitanism, education, gender
(Miller, 2021)	Neoconservatives and Neo-Confucianists: East Asian growth and the tradition.	Examines the roles of neoconservative and Neo-Confucian thoughts to East Asian development.	Neoconservatism, Neo-Confucianism, East Asia
(Lu, 2017)	Gender, Education, the family and women. An alternative to Chinese history	Coveres China and Chinese history: Education, the role of women in family structures.	Women, education, Chinese history
(Candela, 2015)	Sociology in Times of Crisis: National Salvation and the indigenization of knowledge	Examines how sociology was used as the means of national salvation in China in times of crisis.	Sociology, knowledge, crisis
(Orly & Edwards, 2021)	Reorganization of the National Heritage: Hu Shi (1892-1962) on 'The Woman Problem'	The impression of Hu Shi in regard to the role of women and foreign influence in China.	women's rights, Chinese intellectual history
(Wu, 2019)	Confucian revival and the hybrid education discourses in China	The role of Confucian revival Chinese education processes.	Confucianism, and education
(Hu, 2024)	Learned Women: Women's Learning in the Confucian Tradition	Discussion on Confucian tradition education of the women China.	Confucianism, women's education, modern China
(Sun, 2025)	Marginalising in name of empowerment: dexterising the standpoints of rural women on female empowerment in Chinese consumer culture	Examines the perceptions of rural women as relates to empowerment under a consumer culture.	Empowerment, rural women, consumer culture
(Wang, Chan, & Abdullah, 2024)	Educational empowerment and gain with regard to gender equality: Diversity in Education: Women Liberation and the Role of Education	Discusses the aspect of education as contributions to the liberation of women and gender equality.	Gender equality, education, empowerment
(Yin, 2022)	Educatoal movements and feminist discourse in historical, and contemporary education	Critiques the evolution of feminist discourse in China	Gender, Education Ancient China

It is through the lens of the influence of the Neo-Confucian revival on women's studies in the Qianjia period that the reason for strategic gendered knowledge reconstruction has

been added to the themes. This entails the worth of Confucianism to dictate educational opportunities on women, the influence of gender-based pedagogy as a way of strengthening societal roles as well as the efficiency of Neo-Confucianism teachings in determining boundaries of intellectualism among women in this period and the presence of women in education as a way of strengthening their social positions and commitment to the Confucian norms.

Table 2: Key Themes.

Themes	Description
Theme 1: Women's Education in the Qianjia Period	This theme could relate to the development of female education in the Qianlong period during Qing China (1736-1795). It might raise the question about the social, political, and familial backgrounds in the education of women.
Theme 2: Neo-Confucian Revival during the Qianjia Period	It was at this time that Neo-Confucianism revived. The paper could look at the revival of Neo-Confucian thoughts and how they affected the aspect of gender in the education and intellectual life of women.
Theme 3: Gendered Knowledge and Confucianism	Neo-Confucianism is an intellectual tradition that tended to defend the status quo of gender roles.
Theme 4: Women's Role in Intellectual and Social Development	The theme can explore what women did and did not do in protecting and propagating Neo-Confucian ideologies.

3.10. Women's Education in the Qianjia Period

The theme of the education of women in the Qianjia period, with the greater context of Neo Confucianism itself, shows conflict and breakthrough in their status in society. Tan (2019) highlights that although the Confucian classics were traditionally used to enforce gendered norms, they also allowed the appearance of philosophical space to counter them. It can be said that the education of women during the Qianjia period was not an insignificant concept in the Confucian teaching. Gromkowska-Melosik and Boron (2023) state that this revival of Confucianism blurred the lines of women during the era and that, in some ways, education could help solidify traditional females' roles and could be used as a slow step towards progress. Lee (2018) claims that such Confucian ideals as harmony as gendered, as considered daily, but left individual autonomy of women aside largely, which is applicable to the position of women in education during the period. Finally, Sintionean (2020) discusses the appropriation of female characters in Confucian texts in a symbolic way, which perhaps influenced the development of gender roles and the education that women of this period could receive. As a whole, these studies suggest that during this period, the education of women was conditioned by the contradictions between Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and the possibility of gendered shifts in society.

The women's education in the Qianjia period lived in a complicated tension of old Confucian rules and the possible transformation of society. Tan (2019) and other scholars state that Confucian texts imposed gendered roles despite the fact that it also provided spaces of resistance. Gromkowska-Melosik and Boron (2023) develop this contradiction further, arguing that education strengthened the traditional roles and, at the same time, prepared the way to progression in a subtle manner. Nevertheless, as Lee (2018) notes, the sphere of individual autonomy was hardly discussed, implying that the prospects of the actual educational reform were not very broad.

3.11. Neo-Confucian Revival during the Qianjia Period

The Neo-Confucian renaissance of the Qianjia period highlights the place of woman in education as a point of significant cross-reference between traditional gender roles and a

burgeoning role of women. Kang (2017) examines the way gender roles are reflected in the Confucian philosophy and shows the particular significance of gender roles in early modern China, where the Qianjia period presented a locus of conflict between gender and religion in education. Zhang (2021) highlights that the task of reviving traditional practices within the construct of modernity was complicated, and how the New Women in early 18th-century Beijing contemplated between implementing Confucian ideals and values and taking the opportunity to attain schooling and leisure, a kind of individual freedom within the framework of the stratified social order. Goodman (2018) provides information about transnational flows, elaborating on the role of cosmopolitanism in the education of girls and the influence of Confucianism ideas across borders, especially when it comes to secondary school education of girls. Miller (2021) speculates on the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the East Asian region, as the tradition has been celebrated in the name of modernity, the conservativeness of gender roles was created. Together, the studies indicate how the Neo-Confucian revival during the Qianjia period enhanced and at the same time destabilized (in subtle ways) gendered pedagogies, opening a terrain of change concerning the educational role of women.

3.12. Gendered Knowledge and Confucianism

The role of Confucianism in relation to gendered knowledge during the QianJia period is a subject of active research, particularly the associations between Confucianist thought and the education of women and their roles in society. According to Lu (2017), Confucianism played a central role in determining how women are subordinate to men as per the Confucian tenet of patriarchy, which influenced both the school and family system of learning. Candela (2015) brings forward the idea of the indigenization of knowledge, where the Confucian revival in the times of crisis, in the late Qing and early Republican periods, was adjusted to the needs of the political and social culture. This custom-making produced an influence on gendered knowledge in regard to the educational contexts. Orly and Edwards (2021) point out the contradiction between foreign ideas and Confucian core values that played a significant role in the process of reorganizing national heritage, especially when it comes to managing women and chastity. The current revival of Confucianism is criticized in the modern context through the lens of a hybrid narrative of education, as Werner Wu (2019) explains that although the world is moving forward, Confucian belief affects the possibilities of women to receive an education. These works highlight the fact that Confucian gender norms are alive and well, but they also have the effect of indicating the continued effort to restructure the female educational experience in both national and international contexts.

3.13. Women's Role in Intellectual and Social Development

The position of women in the intellectual and social development in the theoretical context of Confucianism and its contemporary meaning is ambivalent. Hu (2024) focuses on evolving processes that the women have been going through in China as the Chinese tradition has taken them to learnings of various kinds, stating that either they are considered learned women as a sort of current labeling in the society. The dichotomy contributes to the controversial position of women in intellectual and social life, where education is regarded as a means of social uplift, and at the same time, they are still limited in regard to classic gender roles. According to Sun (2025), rural women in Chinese consumer culture are marginalized, as empowerment discourses emanating from the mainstream discourse are in direct opposition to the affirmation of disempowerment in reality. This highlights the dissimilarity between the hypothetical empowerment and reality lived by women, especially in the faculty of education.

Wang et al. (2024) also discuss the role of education in the liberation of women, although they observe that the means to obtain entirely gender equality were still also thwarted by societal systems, in that educational and intellectual affiliations still bear the implication of Confucian ideologies. Yin (2022) has a critique of the feminist discourses, as the gendered power structure was still in existence in classical and current histories of China, which directly impacts the empowerment of women with regard to education and intellectual activity. These readings bring to the fore the constant struggle between empowerment and marginalization within the context of the education of women and intellectual growth.

4. Discussion

The discussion of female education of the Qianjia era shows the complicated overlaps between Confucius' thinking and gender social expectations. The teachings of Confucianism, as shown by Tan (2019), played a major role in supporting and questioning the traditional gender roles. However, although there was a revival in Neo-Confucianism, which tried to firmly entrench the roles of gender, the education of women during this era was a potential path towards the undoing of these roles. Gromkowska-Melosik and Boron (2023) also posit that the further focus on Confucian principles would relegate women to domestic spheres, but the education that they received would be able to bring some form of women's empowerment in its confines. Lee (2018) criticizes the Confucian concept of harmony, that, in many cases, excluded women and made them secondary in comparison to their male peers. This is true of the more general restriction of women to education when there was little open education, even in the face of the moral cultivation promoted in ideology. According to Sîntionean (2020), the co-optation of female figures in Confucianism, such as Sin Saimdang, enabled the symbolic empowerment of female figures, but it did not bring significant changes in terms of women's access to education. Thus, although transformation was a possibility, the Neo-Confucian influence on the education of women during the Qianjia period was slow and mixed.

The Neo-Confucian revival of the Qianjia period can be seen as a complicated moment in history, which formally rigidified gender so as to reform it in a subtle way. Kang (2017) reveals the complexity of religion, gender, and education relationship, which are evident as Confucian values were still influencing the educational possibilities of women, reducing them to domestic and discipline-based education. However, as Zhang (2021) argues, this did not imply a static understanding of New Women, but addressed the question of how these women stretched these restrictions through leisure and education and their means of expressing their will. Goodman (2018) brings in a transnational approach, which highlights the role of global dispersion of the Neo-Confucian worldview in the education of girls, and in particular, their secondary education. This larger context implies that education techniques of the Qianjia period were not unique and local but belonged to the transnational discussion that studied the issue of women's education. The complexity of the story is further advanced by Miller (2021), who states that the restoration of Neo-Confucianism was more than a reassertion of tradition but a reformation of it that fitted in both the way of the modern East Asian development and strengthened conservative gender roles. Hence, although education among women in this era was restricted by the Confucian beliefs, it was also provided with loopholes where they could negotiate and transform, albeit slowly.

The genderized form of knowledge and the Confucianism of the Qianjia era reveal a complicated discourse between traditionality and transformation. According to Lu (2017),

the Confucian system was a system that, in itself, oppressed women and placed them more in the field of household management, to which the least educational opportunities were most closely linked. This limited the access of education to females and was limited to moral and home education. Nevertheless, as Candela (2015) claims, Confucianism was not a rigid philosophy but rather one that was indigenized in the context of socio-political crises. It was through this indigenization that gendered knowledge was to be negotiated, albeit not in a radical redefinition of the educational duties of women. Orly and Edwards (2021) further complicate this by discussing this opposition between foreign ideologies and Confucianism, particularly in particular to the issues of women's rights and chastity, which was commonly appealed to during the debates over the need to reform education. According to Wu (2019), the world of globalization still affects the stories of Confucian education, but the importance of Confucian values in the modern Chinese world prevails. The persistence of this use of Confucian gender norms illustrates both the strength of these traditions, even when they must be transformed to meet contemporary obstacles. Gendered education of the Qianjia period, therefore, depicts not only a sense of continuity but also of change in the larger scope of Confucian thought.

The analysis of women's intellectual and social development in the context of the Confucian tradition on the one hand, and with its modern forms, on the other hand demonstrates a mix of empowerment and marginalization with gender discrimination in power politics. Hu (2024) points out that contradictory expectations at the individual level of women in China are characterized by the intellectual exploration often being open to a select group of people, whilst the social norm to conform to the conventional gender roles reins in this availability to many people, as far as individuals are concerned. This contradiction of empowerment being both liberating and imprisoning is present in the analysis of Sun (2025) of rural women, wherein there is this empowerment discourse that stands incongruent with the actual lack of empowerment towards rural women. As much as education is a freedom screen, as supported by Wang et al. (2024), the social system still inhibits women from attaining their full potential. Yin (2022) criticizes the feminist discourse in China, stating that even though considerable progress has been made in the realms of feminist thinking, social and intellectual freedom among women remains restricted by the patriarchal system and Confucianism. Through these studies, it can be said that as much as education poses liberation, it still remains embedded with the requirements of past tendencies of gender norms that would necessitate structural change in order to achieve true gender equality and intellectual freedom.

5. Conclusion

The paper throws light on the less noticeable, yet influential, role of women in the education system in the Qianjia period during the Qing Dynasty, when Neo-Confucianism was powering the society. It also highlights the gendered knowledge system whereby, through Confucian norms, women have managed to pursue intellectual advances. Owing to this, their education was very limited in terms of domestic constraints, the reconstruction of Neo-Confucianism took place and ironically provided some women with the intellectual avenues, including poetry and philosophies of morals, to pursue in select families of the elites. This paper has demonstrated the interrelationship of social norms and the intellectual agency of women, to whom alone belonged the art of negotiating the twists and turns between resistance and conformity. Although the patriarchal restrictions remained the major element of this period, the Qianjia era enabled women to become participants of intellectual discourse

that helped to maintain and propagate the Neo-Confucianism doctrine. The results can be summarized by explaining that, despite the period being characterized by gender traditional roles being paramount to the status of women in education, the roles were not exceptionally constraining; they instead facilitated marginal changes in gendered knowledge. The study adds to a growing body of knowledge on such gender relations in East Asia, and it may be necessary to research more on the participation of women in building the history of education and thoughts.

5.1. Study Limitations

The research is based on secondary sources though this might not allow the researcher to draw firsthand experience of women in the Qianjia regime. Also, elite women with cultured family backgrounds are not necessarily representative of the lives of women of lesser classes or living in rural areas, who had even less access to education. Moreover, analysis of the historical text tended to be submitted to patriarchal tendencies and may have resulted in distorted data about the intellectual contributions of women and insufficient thoroughness of the data.

5.2. Future Direction

Further research can build on this article by including primary sources to reveal more first hand accounts of the educational experiences of women living during the Qianjia period through personal letters, diaries, and even school records. As well, examining the experience of women with different levels of socio-economic status would provide a more detailed idea of gendered knowledge. More research opportunities also exist to investigate how these educational processes may lead to longer-term consequences of intellectual agency and limitation of women in contemporary Chinese society, particularly in the dimensions of feminist dialogue.

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