



Comparative Roles of Women in Rome and Han China

The lack of sources often makes it hard to fully understand the lives of women in ancient societies, but we can piece together a general picture of their daily lives. This video uses a speech by an elite Roman patrician and the writing of an elite Han historian—both women—to uncover some notion of what it was like to be a woman in ancient Rome and China.



00:01

A timeline shows Rome and China and the ways in which they were ruled from 1000 BCE to 500 CE

SAL: I'm here with Eman El-Sheikh, Khan Academy's World History Fellow. And the question I have, Eman, is, history often focuses on men. But clearly, women were playing a significant role, but how much can we know about women, say, 2,000 years ago?

EMAN: So, when we talk about the lives of women in the Classical period, sometimes we're tempted to compare it to the modern day, and that can cause some problems because that's not really a fair comparison. So it's more useful to see how different women living in different societies in the same time period compare to one another. That can make their differences a lot more salient and give us a better idea.

Of course, it's hard to know the history of women back then in general. We don't necessarily have all the best sources. But we can try to piece together some understanding of what their daily lives were like.

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Image of Hortensia's speech

SAL: And we have two points of reference here, one from Rome as it transitions from republic to empire, and another from Han China. So let's look at the reference from Rome. So just for a little bit of context, this speech that we're going to talk about, this occurs in 42 BCE. People might remember that in 44 BCE, you have Julius Caesar getting assassinated on the Ides of March, and it throws the Roman Empire into a civil war. And so, this speech is given during that civil war. Because civil wars, they're not just bloody, they're also expensive, and to fund that civil war, the triumvirs decide to tax the 1,400 wealthiest women. And Hortensia, who gives this speech, is one of those wealthy women.

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EMAN: Hortensia says, "Why should we pay taxes "when we do not share in the offices, honors, "military commands, nor, in short, the government, "for which you fight between yourselves "with such harmful results? "You say, 'Because it is wartime.' "When has there not been war? "And when have women paid taxes? "By nature of their sex, women are absolved from paying taxes "among all mankind. "Our mothers did once rise superior to their sex "and made contributions when you faced "the loss of the empire and the city itself "through the conflict with the Carthaginians. "But they funded their contributions voluntarily "from their jewelry, not from their landed property, "their fields, their dowries, or their houses, "without which it is impossible for free women to live... "Let war with the Celts or Parthians come, "we will not be inferior to our mothers "when it is a question of common safety. "But for civil wars, "may we never contribute "nor aid you against each other. "We did not pay taxes to Caesar or to Pompey, "nor did Marius ask us for contributions, "nor Cinna, nor Sulla, "even though he was a tyrant over this country. And you say that you are re-establishing the republic!"

02:36

SAL: Wow, that was quite powerful. And there's a lot of richness here. What's your takeaway?

EMAN: So, it's interesting that she is saying that by nature of their sex, women are absolved from paying taxes. And it might seem like she's saying that women are weaker. But she's sort of speaking back to this, this requirement that they should use their property. Because they're normally using jewelry, and they're normally using things that they don't necessarily need, in order to fight off foreigners.

And here, she's really taking issue with having to use her livelihood to support a civil war. And she's sort of taking them to task on this, that they're worse than the tyrants for asking this of her.

SAL: And the other thing that jumps out of this, it comes out of the first few statements: "Why should we pay taxes when we do not share "in the offices, honors, military commands, nor, in short, the government?" So she's making very clear, like, "Women don't get to participate. Why should we fund this war?" I also like this part: "You say, 'Because it is wartime.' When has there not been war?" That's a really good point, because Rome, especially at that point, was continuously conquering other peoples, continuously at war—sometimes a civil war, sometimes an external war.

03:44

EMAN: Sure, and, and I think it's, it's interesting how she's pointing to that disparity between the things that men have and women don't have. And she's just trying to say, "Well, if that's how it's going to be, then we should also be exempt from taxation." And I think that's an interesting way to, to voice concerns. And while this might seem very primitive to our modern sensibilities, it's really powerful that a woman is, is taking these government officials to task and being so outspoken and quite scathing in the way she does this.

SAL: I also like the second part right over here, where she is citing that, "Our mothers once also stepped up." And she's referring to, during the Second Punic War, and Hannibal was running amok on the Italian peninsula and even threatening Rome itself, that the women of Rome—especially the wealthy women of Rome—did step up and pay taxes.

EMAN: So, based on this, Sal, what do you think we can learn about Roman women and their lives at this time period?

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SAL: Well, as we pointed out, even in this speech, she cites some direct reference to not having equality to men. But on the other hand, she has stormed the triumvirs' tribunal. I think this is the first time that women were, well, they weren't even allowed there, they just went there. And she's sticking it to the triumvirs pretty strongly. She's saying: "Let war with the Celts or Parthians come. "We will not be inferior to our mothers. "We're willing to step up if it's war with external parties. "But for civil wars, may we never contribute nor aid you against each other." They're saying: "Hey, if you want to fight yourself, that's your problem." And she's even telling them, "And you say that you are re-establishing the republic?" So she's questioning the three most powerful people in the Roman Empire. She's questioning their very intention. So it does show, at least culturally, even if officially, women do not have a strong role, at least these elite women do have enough comfort to be able to go to the three most powerful in the Roman Empire and, and stick it to them.

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EMAN: Yeah, and this is... You know, while this may not seem like a big deal to us now, we have to sort of avoid that comparison, like I said. And if we compare it to some other societies around the same time, this is quite remarkable, for a woman to enter a public institution. And again, she is an elite woman, but let's compare it to,

say, Athenian women. Even elite women in Athens were not likely to have any involvement in the political institutions, were a lot more likely to just remain in the private sphere, were not likely to be as educated as Roman women. And so, the fact that Hortensia can actually enter into the space and be so outspoken is sort of evidence of the fact that Roman women had a degree more freedom than other women who were their contemporaries in other societies.

06:21

Image of text by Ban Zhao

SAL: Absolutely, and let's continue that comparison. We can go about 100, 150 years further in the future from Hortensia's speech. And let's also go to the other side of, almost the other side of the world, we'll go to Eastern Asia, where we are in the Eastern Han Dynasty. So here we have some text from Ban Zhao, who was a female historian, astronomer, mathematician, Confucian philosopher, co-author of the history, the official history, "Book of Han." And it's from her "Lessons for Women."

EMAN: So, Ban Zhao says: "Let a woman modestly yield to others; "let her respect others; "let her put others first, herself last. "Lay the girl baby at birth below the bed "to plainly indicate that she is lowly and weak, "and should regard it as her primary duty "to humble herself before others. "A husband can marry twice, "but his wife must never remarry. "Just as Heaven cannot be disobeyed, "so the wife cannot keep away from her husband. "Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness."

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SAL: So what's your take on that?

EMAN: So, this is, you know, very much in line with the Confucian ideal of womanhood, and that's very much about a woman being very submissive to her male relatives, and for her to stay very modest within the power framework of her society, and to stay pretty much within her own household, and to cultivate a life that is meant to create comfort for the men in her family and her children, and not much more than that.

SAL: Yeah, I could not imagine anyone who read this and took it seriously as doing a lesson for themselves as storming the triumvirs' tribunals, even if they are an elite woman in Imperial China.

08:08

EMAN: Certainly, but I think there's an important thing to remember, and that this kind of document shows a sort of prescriptive approach to women's lives. And that doesn't necessarily mean that women did live this way. I mean, the fact that Ban Zhao herself is writing this is sort of ironic, because she's a woman who is putting herself out there and writing things and not staying in the private sphere, so that's sort of a strange contradiction there. But also, women who had a lot of wealth were likely to become educated, like her. And also, it sort of depended on their generation. Older women were likely to have inheritances, property, just like their Roman counterparts, and they were more likely to engage in trade. And we can find this out by looking at other documents, like wills and so forth. So we can sort of see a tension between the sort of prescriptive Confucian ideals and how women actually lived, and in a lot of ways, having, having wealth allowed women to buy their, their way out of these constrictive practices and ideas about women.

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SAL: I definitely agree with that irony. It's quite thick here, because she's telling other women to indicate that she is lowly and weak, but Ban Zhao herself, as I mentioned, she's a historian, astronomer, mathematician, Confucian philosopher. She wrote, co-wrote one of the official histories of the Han Empire. She's more prominent and has done more than the great majority of men in her time, so she's clearly not lowly and weak. So the irony is quite thick.

EMAN: Certainly. It's interesting to look at these things, because, like you said, it gives us a sense of the difference, right? Like, there seems to be quite a different culture at play between Rome and China at this time. And so, making that kind of comparison gives us a lot more information about women's lives than simply saying that there's a sort of a single history for all women of this time period, and that's simply not the case. As we can see, there are huge differences between the civilizations; certainly, even within civilizations, there can be huge differences.

10:06

SAL: Yes. Both of the examples we looked at have been very elite women. We're talking about women well within the top one percent. If you went to more average women, their situation would have been very different.

EMAN: Certainly, so, this idea that women are supposed to have a nice home full of family, and stay within that, well, only wealthy women can really live up to that, because if you have to leave the house to make a living, you might not be able to sort of create this idyllic household full of children and spend all your time managing that. So that's an important difference, as well.

SAL: Thanks, Eman, this was really valuable.

EMAN: Thanks, Sal.