



**Ming China:
Courts and Contacts 1400–1450**

Edited by Craig Clunas,
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Chapter 25

The *Book of the Five Relationships*: Thoughts on Mid-Fifteenth-Century Court Confucianism

Sarah Schneewind

Did a Joseon book inspire a Ming court compilation?

In the first half of the 15th century, Great Ming adopted luxuries and signs of power from across Eurasia, and from Africa and the Middle East. Joseon Korea sent, not always willingly, brushes and paper, gold and pickles, concubines and eunuchs, chefs and animals.¹ But neither books nor written moral instruction seem likely imports from what the Ming saw as a lowly tributary. Rather striking, therefore, is a suggestion made in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (hereafter, *DMB*), published in 1976, that the *Wulun shu* 五倫書 (*Book of the Five Relationships*), was ‘an imperial undertaking... initiated in the Xuande period, possibly as a result of the Korean publication in 1434 of the elegantly illustrated book of exempla, *Samgang haengsil* 三綱行實 [-do 圖, or *The Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds*].’² This chapter will assess the likelihood of Joseon influence and how to think of the book as an ‘imperial undertaking’, and use the two books to complicate the common view of Confucianism as a strict, oppressive and hierarchical system.

One can imagine the Xuande 宣德 emperor (r. 1426–35) receiving a Korean book from a consort or a mission, admiring it in the same way as he did so many Korean products, and perhaps deciding that a complimentary imitation would be timely in around 1434 when Ming was losing, and Joseon gaining, ground against the Jurchens in the north.³ None of the references given in the *DMB* entry, however, justifies the hypothesis. With respect to timing, King Sejong (r. 1418–50) started the discussion of what became the *Samgang haengsil-do* (hereafter, *Samgang*) in 1428; was given a draft in 1432; ordered printing on 4 June 1434; and ordered distribution on 24 December 1434. The fastest travel time from Seoul, capital of Joseon, to Beijing was 34 days, and the Xuande emperor died on 31 January 1435. His last six days of life could not have sufficed for him to select and rework items from various histories and classics for the *Wulun shu* as the preface added in the Zhengtong 正統 period (r. 1436–49) says he did.⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible that Sejong sent a proof to the Ming court earlier in 1434, or a partial mock-up even earlier, given that another book had been sent for approval in 1422.⁵ In short, timing alone cannot tell us whether or not Xuanzong admired *Samgang* and began *Wulun shu* in imitation.

Another factor undermines the imitation hypothesis more definitively. The two collections share many stories, but no organisational features.⁶ *Samgang* has three fascicles devoted to the Three Bonds: the bond of child to parent, minister to ruler and wife to husband. *Samgang* includes 111 stories of filial children (*xiaozi* 孝子), 110 of loyal officials or loyal subjects (*zhongchen* 忠臣) and 110 of fiercely devoted women (*lienü* 烈女). *Wulun shu*, by contrast, contains 62 chapters that are unevenly divided among categories (see below). *Samgang* grants each exemplar his or her prose story and a poem, both in Chinese, and an illustration. (Hangul prompts were added to later editions.) *Wulun shu* includes only prose accounts. *Samgang* rigidly confines each exemplar to one woodblock, while *Wulun shu* runs text from page to page in the usual way. What this means is that the reader of *Samgang* first encounters a pictorial narration of the story, then turns the page to read about him or her.⁷ On the face of it, the two books share little in terms of appearance.

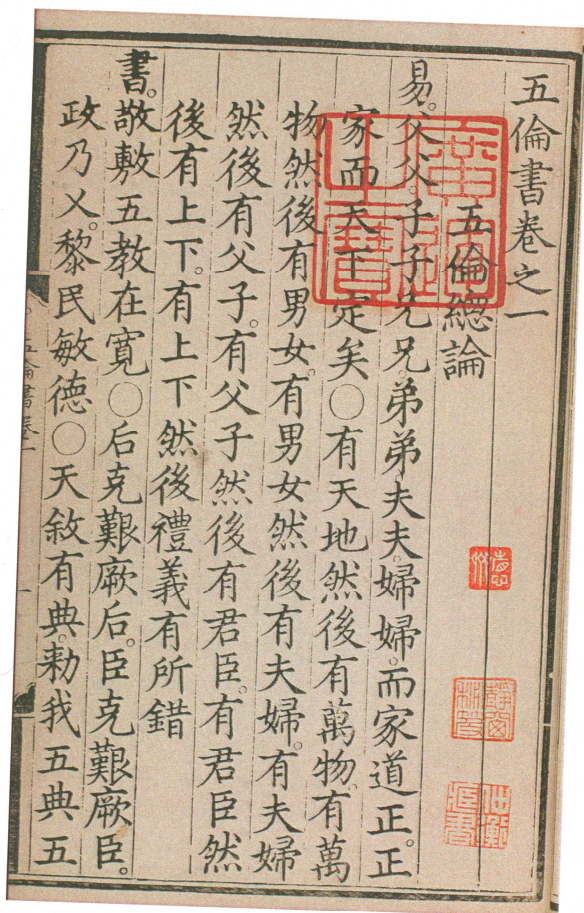


Plate 25.1 First page of *Book of the Five Relationships* (*Wulun shu* 五倫書), dated 1447. Woodblock printed, ink on paper, height 37cm. Princeton University Library, East Asian Library, TC328/1212



Plate 25.2 *Book of the Five Relationships* (*Wulun shu* 五倫書), imperial edition with seal of the Kings of Lu, dated 1447. Woodblock printed, ink on paper, height 35cm. The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, Backhouse 421

Yet we may still ask whether *Samgang* had the kind of flawless beauty the Xuande emperor appreciated. An extant example of *Wulun shu* from the Xuande court is in the Princeton University Library and the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Pls 25.1–2). There is debate as to whether the 1434 edition of *Samgang* is extant, but the 1982 reprint is believed to be the closest to the original (Pls 25.3–4), so I rely on that here. The two books share the formal features of the finest palace productions: double borders, on the centre fold thick black mouths inside elephant trunks, blackened fishtails with scalloped white strips and decorative circles above the central title lines. Both books were punctuated on the blocks. *Wulun shu* was larger: the court edition is about 40 x 23cm by my measurement, compared to *Samgang*'s reported not quite 27 x 17cm. *Wulun shu* was carved in large, elegant standard script (*kaishu* 楷書), and printed on high-quality tree-bark paper.⁸ The imperial Qing catalogue notes its great purity.⁹ *Samgang* is, if anything, less elegant, although the pictures make it more appealing. More to the point, since many beautiful Ming palace printed books had reached Joseon by 1428, it is more likely, as Young Kyun Oh concludes, that they influenced the look of *Samgang* and not the other way around.

The purpose of the *Samgang haengsil-do*

Yet books from the Ming court shaped *Samgang* only so far. More significant were debates that were taking place at the Joseon court. King Sejong and his team of officials were

shaping a Neo-Confucian realm centred on filiality and ritual for all, and governed by a powerful king wielding the *Great Ming Code* (*Da Ming lu* 大明律). Other aristocrats or *yangban*, however, understood Neo-Confucianism as supporting hereditary status and upper-class privilege.¹⁰ In 1428, the court learned that a commoner had killed his father. A high minister deplored the patricide as a case of 'a person of lower status killing one of higher status', but for Sejong patricide was in a class of its own.¹¹ Wives will go around killing their husbands, he says, and servants their masters; a patricide, by contrast, strikes at the very heart of a kingly order built on filial piety.¹² To transform all his subjects, down to 'ordinary people living in the alleys and lanes', Sejong initially ordered the ethnically Uighur Joseon scholar Seol Sun (Seol Sun (?–1435)) to revise an earlier work on filial children.¹³ Ministers insisted on the addition of wifely exemplars to strengthen new patrilineal ideals in order to curb the property rights and independence that Goryeo elite women had formerly enjoyed. When Sejong countered with a proposal to include officials who had remained true to their lords in adversity, Seol Sun in turn insisted on giving dignity to scholar-officials by adding exemplars who had loyally remonstrated with rulers about their behaviour.¹⁴

Samgang focuses on ascriptive hierarchy and the duty of subordinates. Within each category, the Chinese exemplars come in chronological order, followed by the Korean exemplar in chronological order, but royalty are moved to



Plate 25.3 *The Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds (Samgang haengsil-do 三綱行實圖)*, reprint of the 1432 edition (Seoul, 1982). Page showing the illustration of righteous wife Zhang

the beginning regardless of timing.¹⁵ The chronologically nonsensical arrangement of illustrations puts emperors and officials higher on the page than commoners; and kings, official buildings, fathers, husbands, graves and funerals above subjects, houses, sons, wives and living quarters.¹⁶

Most fundamentally, the Three Bonds formulation valorises fixed hierarchy over other Confucian values. It demands absolute filiality of the child (and daughter-in-law), loyalty-to-the-death of the minister (and subject) and fierce devotion of the wife (or widow), without reciprocal obligations on the part of parents, rulers or husbands. Invented by the Han toady and patrilinealist Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), the formula also served Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) at the other end of imperial history as a bastion against egalitarian challenges.¹⁷ The Three Bonds was not the only option Confucianism offered: Joseon later made other choices, and *Wulun shu* refers to the Three Bonds but relies on another formulation.¹⁸

The dating of *Wulun shu*

Korean influence on *Wulun shu* seems unlikely. Was it an ‘imperial undertaking’? The attribution to the Xuande emperor in the preface may have been fiction given that he died a decade before its publication. The preface itself, putatively by his son, may have been ghost-written, perhaps by Grand Secretary Yang Shiqi 楊士奇 (1365–1444), as a way to camouflage teachings meant for the teenage Zhengtong emperor as teachings from him to others, in the name of his father.¹⁹

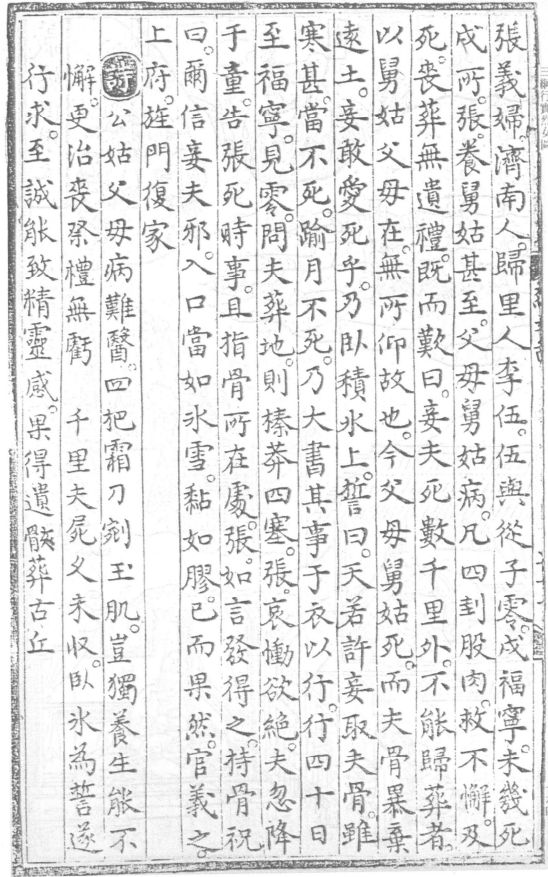


Plate 25.4 *The Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds (Samgang haengsil-do 三綱行實圖)*, reprint of the 1432 edition (Seoul, 1982). Page showing the text of righteous wife Zhang

If the Xuande emperor did work on the project, it clearly fell into abeyance until some eight years after his death. Two kinds of confusion surround the dating of *Wulun shu*. First, the *DMB* gives conflicting information. One entry records that the book was ‘finished and printed in 1443’, leading to speculations about an imaginary delay in one county’s acquisition of the book.²⁰ But another entry correctly gives 1443 as the year Liu Yan 劉儼 (1394–1457), a new metropolitan graduate (*jinshi* 進士), was assigned to work on the compilation.²¹ Further sources show that the team included other men from the Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin yuan* 翰林院), such as Lü Yuan 呂原 (1418–62), Yang Ding 楊鼎 (1410–85) and Qian Xili 錢習禮 (1373–1461), all metropolitan graduates who later lectured the emperor on the classics.²²

Second, the *DMB* entry on Liu Yan dates the printing of *Wulun shu* to Zhengtong 13 (1448), but accounts in the *Veritable Records* for the year 1447 clearly state that the Zhengtong emperor ordered the printing of the book on 27 April and the building of 40 storerooms for its woodblocks and copies on 25 September.²³ On 27 October 1448, copies of the book were sent to Confucian schools across the empire.²⁴ The source for the incorrect dating in *DMB* may be *Hanlin ji* 翰林記 (*Records of the Hanlin Academy*), which mistakes the year of the book’s dissemination for the year of its completion. This error is compounded by a later comprehensive catalogue, which adds the correct month of the preface of the book, but in the wrong year.²⁵ The *Hanlin ji* author Huang Zuo was perhaps misled by a rather funny memorial of 1448:

The teachers and students of the Confucian schools of the empire, having received from above the gift of the *Wulun shu*, are constantly coming to the capital to express their thanks for this grace, neglecting and abandoning their task of study. We request that from now on, upon their receiving it, it be considered sufficient that they face the court to express thanks for this grace. The emperor agreed.

禮部奏：天下儒學師生蒙賜五倫書籍，往往赴京謝恩，荒廢學業，乞令就彼望闕謝恩為便。從之。²⁶

The *Veritable Records* dates the *Wulun shu* quite clearly: its compilation started or re-started in 1443; the completed book was printed in 1447; and it was promulgated in 1448.

Comparing the contents of *Wulun shu* and *Samgang*

Although each had been discussed before, Mencius was the first to list five 'cardinal human relations' (*renlun* 人倫), without calling them 'the Five Relationships':

Between parent and child (literally, father and son) there is affection; between ruler and minister righteous propriety; between husband and wife distinction; elder and younger [brother] follow precedence; friends share good faith.

父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信。²⁷

The Neo-Confucians built on this formulation, making explicit that the fourth relation refers to brothers. *Wulun shu* builds on that tradition, as **Table 1** shows, following the 'Doctrine of the Mean' in putting ruler-minister ahead of parent-child.²⁸

Accordingly, *Wulun shu* differs from *Samgang* in a number of ways. First, the opening chapter of *Wulun shu* surveys the set of five relationships through brief quotations, and the other chapters cover each side of each dyadic relationship with both 'fine words' (*jiayan* 嘉言, a phrase from the *Book of Documents*) and 'good deeds' (*shanxing* 善行, a phrase from the *Record of Rites*).²⁹ Second, the 'fine words' sections provide a theoretical component, with quotations from all

of the Confucian Five Classics and Four Books, and a dozen later works by writers including the Song Neo-Confucians. Third, the Five Relationships formula includes the relatively equal relations of 'brothers' and 'friends'. Fourth, *Wulun shu* goes further to include sections on daughters, mothers, uncles, aunts, lineage relatives and 'teacher-student.'

A fifth and important difference is that *Wulun shu* makes demands of both parties. *Samgang* contains not one single 'devoted husband'.³⁰ *Wulun shu* includes 11 devoted husbands or fiancés. Most are men who refuse to desert the partners of their early obscurity for new, high-ranking wives, but there is also one husband who refuses to add concubines. The newly successful men of Song times in this category refuse to abandon wives or fiancées who are not only lowly, but also disabled (since birth status as such had diminished in importance since Tang times). For instance, one new examination graduate whose betrothed had gone dumb stands up to the demands of his elder brother that he choose someone able to advance the family interests:

If I do not marry this girl, for her whole life she will never have a married home... To cast someone off because of illness, how could that accord with human feeling?

此女某若不娶，平生遂無所歸。...因即疾而遂棄，豈人情哉。³¹

Emotional sincerity is central in *Wulun shu*. An entry on Liu Tingshi 劉庭式 (fl. c. 1078–85) tells how he had contracted early to marry the daughter of a local neighbour. He earned his metropolitan degree, and could have made a better match since the betrothal silk had not yet been sent over to formalise the agreement. Moreover, the girl had gone blind. But, when someone urged a different match, Liu laughed and said:

My heart is already promised to her! How could I turn my back on my earlier intentions? 吾心已許之矣。豈可負吾初心哉。

Table 1 Table of contents from *Wulun shu*

Category	Subcategory	Subtopics	Appended relationships	# of chapters (juan)	Which juan?
The Five Relations				1	1
Way of the Ruler	Fine words			2	2–3
	Good deeds	49	(The final 5 subsections are on royal women.)	19	4–23
Way of the Minister	Fine words			1	24
	Good deeds	42		28	25–53
Way of the Parent	Fine words			1/2	54
	Good deeds		Mothers, uncles, aunts	1 1/2	54–5
Way of the Child	Fine words			1/2	56
	Good deeds		Daughters, wives	1 1/2	56–8
Way of the Husband and Wife	Fine words			1/2	59
	Good deeds		(Separate subsections on husbands and wives.)	1/2	59
Way of Elder and Younger Brothers	Fine words			1/2	60
	Good deeds		Lineage	1/2	60
Way of Friends	Fine words			1/2	61
	Good deeds		Teacher-student	1 1/2	61–2

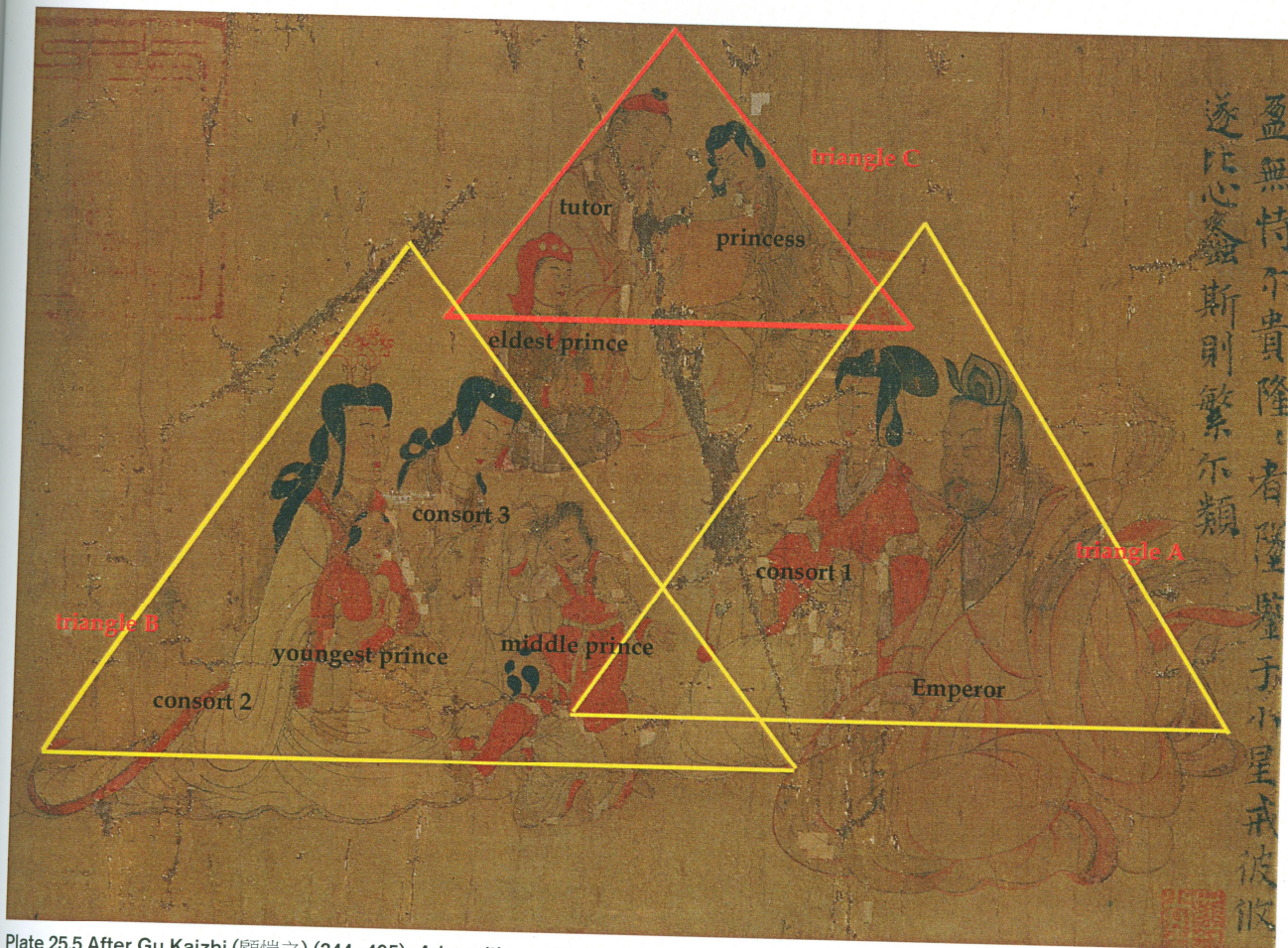


Plate 25.5 After Gu Kaizhi (顧愷之) (344–405), *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies (Nüshi zhen tu 女史箴圖)*, detail of family scene, c. 400–500s. Handscroll, ink and colours on silk, height 24.37cm, length 343.75cm. British Museum, London, 1903,0408,0.1

They married, and she bore several children before dying. After several years, when Liu still had not remarried, a colleague said to him: ‘Grief is born of love; love is born of sexual desire. In this case, where does your love come from? What does your grief come from?’ Liu replied:

I only know that I have lost my wife, and that’s all. If I trace it back in reasoning that sex produces love and love produces grief, then the sexual desire will weaken, the love will fall into abeyance, and my grief will also be forgotten. Then, indeed, any rippling sleeve in the marketplace, with dallying eyes that beckon to the heart, could be made a wife!

吾知喪吾妻而已。吾如綠色而生愛綠愛而生哀。色衰愛弛。吾哀亦忘。則凡楊袂倚市。目挑而心招者。皆可以為妻也。³²

The point is the humanity and moral value of all parties, and the individual’s development of his natural conscience – not obedience to hierarchy or family interest.

In *Wulun shu*, superiors hold as much responsibility as privilege. One account tells of the exemplary brother Minister Niu Hong 牛弘, whose younger brother liked to drink. Minister Niu arrived home one evening to find his wife furious because the bibulous brother had shot their cart ox; he did not even reprimand his brother, but simply bore it, like his namesake the ox.³³ Similarly, a family head recorded in the ‘lineage’ section, when asked how the family had managed to stay together for nine generations, took a brush and he wrote ‘Forbearance’ (*ren 忍*) 100 times on a piece of paper.³⁴ He did not speak of forcing or even educating

inferiors into obedience. Such is Confucian harmony in *Wulun shu*. Compared with the punishing one-sided obligations of the ‘Three Bonds’, or with the contemporary European ‘Great Chain of Being’, the Five Relationships offers a capacious and humanist utopianism.

Further, the ‘Five Relationships’ formulation chosen by the Ming court for this book undermines any equation of ‘Confucianism’ with ‘family values’. The model instead is a set of dyadic relationships, of which two are not family relations. Exemplars are fiercely conscientious individuals who sometimes speak and act against both the wider family interest and the orders of seniors, precisely in order to carry out the mutual, if unequal, obligations of a particular dyad. Dora Ching, pointing out the paucity of visual representations of the family in imperial China, discusses the *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies (Nüshi zhen tu 女史箴圖)* in the British Museum, traditionally attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (344–405) but dated to c. 400–500, as a rare portrayal of an ideal complete family.³⁵ To my eye, however, the painting shows a ‘family’ broken into dyads, whose overlapping relations of superiority are very difficult to represent properly all together. Ching’s analysis highlights the way in which the bodies of the adults set boundaries that protect and confine the children, but actually the eldest prince and the princess royal form part of the lines of the overall pyramid, leaving their backs unprotected (Pl. 25.5). We can see the pyramid as comprised three smaller triangles: at the lower right sit

husband (ruler) and wife; on the left mothers and children, with the older son more central than but no taller than his brother, and the secondary consorts bent in less dignity and with the tops of their heads slightly below that of the empress; and at the top, teacher-student, so that the eldest son (and heir) is above both his brothers – but his sister is distressingly above him, or possibly just further back. With overlapping age, generation, gender and status hierarchies, as well as the mutual responsibilities of each dyad to represent, it is small wonder that few painters attempted whole family portraits.³⁶

The ruler-minister relationship in *Wulun shu*

A sixth difference between *Wulun shu* and *Samgang* is that the former focuses on governance rather than social hierarchy. Governance dominates even some stories of family exemplars: the first 'devoted husband' listed, for instance, wins office because the respect he and his wife show one another demonstrates that he has sufficient virtue to govern commoners.³⁷ A man of early Ming times listed under 'Way of the Father' wrote to his son with advice about incorruptibility in office; when bureaucratic backbiting sent the son to jail, the father's letter surfaced, and so impressed the emperor that he released the son and rewarded the father.³⁸ Nominally a compendium of all relationships, this book focuses on the responsibilities of the ruling class.

The ruler-minister relation dominates the compilation: it receives 50 chapters, about 80 percent of the book, analysed according to 91 topics.³⁹ The categories of rulers' 'good deeds', which were often just utterances, are: sagely virtue, sagely study, respecting Heaven, following ancestral laws, sagely filiality, the virtue of humility, warnings about the need for caution, warnings about desires, frugality, esteeming good faith, constant discernment (of others' minds and qualities), rites and music, taking sacrifice seriously, establishing the heir apparent, harmony among relatives, fiefs, virtuous transformation, diligence in governing, systems of rule, commanding officials, seeking advice, listening to and accepting advice, nourishing the aged, revering Confucian scholars, promoting study, nourishing talent, recognising others, seeking out the wise, employing the wise, benevolence to commoners, emphasising agriculture, rectifying names, rewarding those who contribute, praising and commending, rewards and punishments, eliminating heterodoxy, mercy in punishment, forgiving trespasses, managing troops, managing horses, commanding generals and controlling barbarians.⁴⁰

Each category spans history, sometimes from the very beginning through early Ming. Frugal behaviour, for instance, is demonstrated by 28 rulers from the sage-king Yao 堯 to Yongle 永樂 (r. 1403–24).⁴¹ There is some intertextuality: after a Han emperor appears, for instance, three articles refer to him directly. Over time change appears: the first 12 articles involve frugality on the part of the ruler himself, sometimes explicitly to benefit the people; in medieval times, frugality encompasses ministers and palace women; in the Song (960–1279) frugality is demanded even of commoners. While *Wulun shu* was being compiled, unrest caused by imperial demands made the examples condemning requisitions from the people highly topical.

The categories of good deeds for ministers illustrate the many tasks and challenges facing officials at all levels: assisting (the ruler's) virtue, making basic plans for the dynasty, regulating ritual, regulating appointments, regular assessments of officials, selection of officials, preserving the law, insisting on doing right, constancy in doing right (in both often despite pressure from rulers), reproving and warning (the ruler), impeachments, loyal righteousness, knowing the main principles, administration, transforming people through teaching, correcting popular customs, having mercy on commoners, soothing words, the encouragement of agriculture, equalising tax burdens, emptying jails, preparing against drought, rescuing people from natural disasters, water management, the soldier-cultivation system, serving as an ambassador, military tactics (this has the most sections), border defence, eliminating bandits, suppressing and pacifying, relating to the people with kindness and good faith, orthodox study, diligence and determination, tireless labour, perspicacity, knowledge, loyal reverence, virtuous self-control and tolerance (with respect to those who wrong you), incorruptibility, modest yielding, not taking advantage and quiet retirement.⁴² 'Loyalty' (*zhong* 忠) appears twice: as 'loyal righteousness' (*zhong yi* 忠義), which in the examples given in the book usually means dying for one's country at the hands of invaders and rebels; and as 'loyal reverence' (*zhong jin* 忠謹), meaning expressions of ritual reverence for the ruler that exceed common practice. One exemplar's story in this category concludes: 'Because of his loyalty, the emperor often followed his advice'.⁴³

Although Confucian relationships were dyadic, this list shows that within the ruler-minister relation there lurked a third term: *min* 民, meaning subjects or commoners. In fact, the dyad *junchen* 君臣 is ambiguous, sometimes meaning ruler-minister, sometimes ruler-subject. Throughout the Ming, emperors and officials often praised or blamed one another in terms of whether they helped or harmed the populace. The triad ruler-minister-subject appears from the earliest proclamations right through the last emperor's suicide note at the end of the dynasty: he criticised himself, but also blamed his officials for the disaster and asked the rebels not to harm a single one of the common people.⁴⁴ We could say that in Ming this third term – the people – actually mediated the relationship between ruler and minister in their ideological and political pronouncements.⁴⁵

The uses and legacy of *Wulun shu*

We could see *Wulun shu* as imperial propaganda. The Hongwu and Yongle emperors and their empresses star in most of the chapters on rulers; in the frugality section, for instance, the average number of lines of text per ruler is five, but the Hongwu emperor gets 14. Ming emperors are also recorded as recognised exemplars from the period, thus partaking of their glory. The preface to *Wulun shu* boasts about how the dynasty has nourished, in people's daily lives, the closeness of parent and child, the righteousness between ruler and minister, the differentiation of husband and wife, the orderly precedence of brothers and the good faith between friends, bringing decades of peace.

After the initial wide promulgation of *Wulun shu*, rulers especially bestowed the book upon princes who requested it;

the Zhengtong emperor himself was the first to do this, in 1449.⁴⁶ His successor also honoured officials with this gift, giving it to the top metropolitan graduate in 1451 and Hanlin chancellor Ke Qian 柯潛 (1423–73); in 1448 to the most long-lived Ming official, Wei Ji 魏驥 (1374–1471); and in about 1451 to Li Kui 李奎 (1389–1457), who like some others constructed a special building to house it.⁴⁷ *Wulun shu* was among the many rewards (alternating with punishments) granted to the Mongolian Ming general Mao Qara 毛哈喇 (1394–1468); he told his son and grandson, who later died alongside him battling Mongol forces:

Loyalty and righteousness are all in here. You should respectfully learn it thoroughly. Do not neglect this!

忠義盡在是矣汝等奉誦之毋忽。⁴⁸

As a gift, *Wulun shu* was part of a larger set of imperial publications and writers also drew on it in this capacity. It provided the epigraph for the treatise on music by Prince Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 (1536–1611).⁴⁹ Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447–1516) lists it with other imperial books in an examination essay, noting that the books were widely read, even by commoners.⁵⁰ A commentary by Xia Liangsheng 夏良勝 (1480–1538) on the fundamental text ‘Doctrine of the Mean’ includes a Yongle edict he had read about in the *Wulun shu*.⁵¹ A Mongolian scholar in Henan annotated it for students.⁵²

The collection served as a source for early Ming history.⁵³ Many notable scholar-officials, such as Wei Jiao 魏校 (1483–1543) and Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530), mention reading it.⁵⁴ Officials drew on it right away for precedents: a memorial of 9 June 1450 references a saying of the Yongle emperor on wide consultation with officials, and another of 15 June 1450 cites it on taking personal responsibility for sacrifice.⁵⁵ Wang Shu 王恕 (1416–1508) used a Yongle utterance from *Wulun shu* to discuss rites to Confucius.⁵⁶ Another memorial urged the ruler to attend to heavenly portents as *Wulun shu* shows the Hongwu emperor doing.⁵⁷ A 16th-century official used it as ‘reliable evidence’ of early Ming processes of advice and consent.⁵⁸ Urging active daily teaching by the throne to guide officials and commoners, Qiu Jun 邱濬 (1418–95) quoted from *Wulun shu* the Yongle emperor’s description of beginning his mornings with quiet-sitting.⁵⁹ The compilation promoted imperial centrality, and it may have been key in preserving specific sayings and actions of the early Ming rulers. But it recorded officials too: Ye Sheng 葉盛 (1420–74) wrote that in his time, only *Wulun shu* recorded the important contributions of early Ming general Liu Jiang 劉江 (fl. c. 1370).⁶⁰

Government offices reprinted *Wulun shu* whole, but like other palace works, its wide audience meant that it also stimulated commercial editions and imitations, some illustrated.⁶¹ It also justified other collections. In 1457–8, Han Yong (1422–78) collected Ming poems in Jiangxi 江西 province, where he had served for about eight years before being sidelined.⁶² His preface refers to the classical role of poetry in reflecting popular opinion and thus the quality of rule. He celebrates the successive Ming ‘sages’ for nourishing human talent and virtue, so that talent is rising, music is stirring and everyone from the nobility down to the cotton-wearers of the hills and forests is recreating antiquity –

especially in Jiangxi. But not *only* there, of course: just as the Sagely Son of Heaven has promulgated *Wulun shu*, Han writes, we scholar-officials will be able to collect recent poems more broadly, once the completion of the national gazetteer has ushered in a true period of ‘instituting rites and making music’.⁶³ Han, as both beneficiary and partner of the glorious throne, claims the right to compile poetry/public opinion himself.

Given the long history of remonstrance, this partnership did not preclude sharp criticism. During a severe drought in 1493, the Hongzhi emperor called for frugality and for straight talk. Li Dongyang responded in May with a characteristic Mencian critique, referencing comments on the timely use of natural resources.⁶⁴ Resources are limited, he writes, as the current impoverishment of both subjects and state coffers shows. They can only be ‘inexhaustible’ if the ruler sets an example by respecting frugality; and to encourage that, Li condenses a story from *Wulun shu* in which the Yongle emperor meditates on how his frequent ceremonial changes of clothing remind him of Empress Ma, his putative mother, personally mending for the royal family, and of the joy such thrift brought his father, the Hongwu emperor. Li reminds his own ruler that the founder of the Ming, and his attending ministers, had set the Empress Ma’s thrift as a ‘law for ten thousand generations’ (*wei wanshi fa* 為萬世法), a judgement reinforced by it being recorded by the Xuande emperor in *Wulun shu*.⁶⁵ If the emperor sets the example, the whole bureaucracy will follow suit, ‘managing finances with all their might’ (*jingying jili* 經營極力).⁶⁶ But the book enables Li to go beyond encouragement. Before telling the story of Empress Ma mending, Li borrows a saying originally from the *Tang tongdian*, then quoted by Taizu 太祖 of the Song dynasty (r. 960–76), and included just above, in the section on rulers’ frugality in *Wulun shu*:

Just because there is one man ruling the whole empire, it does not mean that the whole empire is an offering to that one man. Well, if the empire is not an offering to one man, to whom is it an offering? The point is that it is not a private possession!

以一人治天下不以天下奉一人。夫天下不以一人將誰奉乎。不私其有之謂也。⁶⁷

Song Taizu directed this saying at his womenfolk as they draped their palace in expensive fabrics. The contrast with Empress Ma’s mending relates it directly to Li’s memorial, enabling him to anticipate the attack by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–95) in 1663 on rulers who take the realm as their own family estate and squeeze every penny from the people to enrich themselves and their heirs, rather than working hard to benefit all.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The *Wulun shu* made an impact; among other things, the label ‘*wulun*’ (Five Relations) became common only after its publication. To assess the *DMB*’s summary statement about it, quoted at the start of this chapter: the Korean *Samgang* probably did not inspire the compilation. The Xuande emperor may have started the project, but even if he did, most of the work was probably done under his eldest son. Moreover, *Wulun shu* was an ‘imperial undertaking’ only in a loose sense. It was compiled by at least four of the sharpest

minds in the country during the mid-Ming shift of initiative away from the throne and into the hands of ministers. Scholar-official Ni Qian 倪謙 (1415–79) wrote that *Wulun shu*, Taizu's *Great Warning* (*Yuzhi da gao* 御制大誥) and two collections compiled under the Yongle emperor urging secret good deeds and filiality all showed how the Ming emperors, like the sage-kings, led through rites and education.⁶⁹ But in fact *Wulun shu* is not like the others. Aside from the preface, *Wulun shu* is not written in the emperor's voice, and it targets not ordinary people, but the powerful, as did Liu Yan's next project, the *Mirror for Rulers* (*Lidai junjian* 歷代君鑑). My brief introduction has overlooked the contemporary relevance of the work as well as the Hanlin Academy authors, who may have discussed their work on *Wulun shu* somewhere at more length than I have found.⁷⁰ But I propose that this fascinating, beautiful, mid-15th century court production may be best understood as a Hanlin work of history offering practical moral guidance to both rulers and ministers in their joint responsibility to the country and the people.

Notes

I am grateful to Young Kyun Oh, Sixiang Wang, David Robinson, Julia Murray, Bruce Tindall and the conference organisers.

- 1 Clark 1988, 290–1; Ye Quanhong 1991, 134; *MSL Xuanzong shilu* 96.9b (7/10/辛未) and for tribute missions in the Xuande period pp. 108.3a, 108.4a, 108.10a, 108.13b, 108.14a, 110.1b, 110.3b, 110.4b, 113.13a, 115.4a–b.
- 2 *DMB*, 970.
- 3 Clark 1988, 288.
- 4 Huang Yuji c. 1690, 11.41.
- 5 Oh 2013, 96 and personal communication 3 June 2014. For the journey, see Wang Sixiang 2013.
- 6 For example, *Samgang* has 26 stories of Yuan-era wives, *Wulun shu* has 11. Six are the same; but the wording varies, and all of the overlapping stories come from the official history of the Yuan (*Yuanshi* 元史).
- 7 See Oh 2013, 105 for a brilliant interpretation of this arrangement.
- 8 For discussion of these features, see Jang 2008, 125–8 and Oh 2013, 94 ff. My measurement is of the Harvard rare book copy; Jang reports on a smaller one that may be the Harvard microfilmed edition.
- 9 Yu Minzhong 1775, 9/11–12.
- 10 Deuchler 1992, 26–7, 115–17.
- 11 Oh 2013, 53.
- 12 Oh 2013, 61.
- 13 Oh 2013, 62.
- 14 Deuchler 1992, ch. 1. Oh 2013, 75. This combines Oh's explanation and my speculation.
- 15 Oh 2013, 100.
- 16 Oh 2013, 117.
- 17 Rather ungrateful, considering that Ban's own younger brother rescued him from prison. See Zhu Zhanji 1443, 60/9. Ban Gu writes: 'What is it I call the Three Bonds? Ruler–minister, father–son, husband–wife.' See Ban Gu c. 80, 7/1.
- 18 King Sejo (r. 1455–68) ordered his ministers to compile a *Record of the Five Relationships*. See *Sejo sillok* 36.23b (1465/7/25#2). In 1518, a group of scholars supplemented *Samgang* with an *Illustrated Guide to Two Relationships*. See Oh 2013, 227; Zhu Zhanji 1443, preface and 62/14.
- 19 Yang Shiqi wrote a poem about *Wulun shu*; see Yang Shiqi c. 1445, 58/26.
- 20 *DMB*, 293; Brook 1996, 106; Brook 1998, 652, 654.
- 21 *DMB*, 970. Liu Yan eventually got in trouble for among other

- things failing his own son in an examination. See his epitaph in Xu Hong 1505, 8/19.
- 22 On Lü Yuan, see his epitaph in Li Xian c. 1470, 20/23, and in Xu Hong 1505, 8/12; his 1462 death notice in *MSL Yingzong shilu* 346.5a (6/11/庚申); and his biography in Liao Daonan 1545, 3/32. On Yang Ding, see his death notice in *MSL Xianzong shilu* 267/3a–b (21/6/甲午). On Qian Xili, see Wang Zhi c. 1465, 24/59. Peng Shi 彭時 (1416–75) may also have worked on the collection, while at the National University; see Li Xian c. 1470, 15/16.
- 23 *DMB*, 970. *MSL Yingzong shilu* 151.8b (12/3/己丑) (printing), 157.5a (12/8/乙亥) (storage). *MS* 8/98/2425–6 reports that the Xuande emperor made the book and the Zhengtong emperor prefaced and printed it. See also Jang 2008, 122 n. 22, but the citation to the *Huidian* should be to the *Yingzong shilu*.
- 24 *MSL Yingzong shilu* 170.7b (13/9/癸丑).
- 25 Huang Zuo 1560–6, 13.10b; the catalogue is *Qianqingtang shumu*, Huang Yuji c. 1690, 11/41.
- 26 Memorial from the Ministry of Rites (*Libu* 禮部). Yu Ruji et al. 1620, 94/26, and *MSL Yingzong shilu* 172.6a (13/11/庚子).
- 27 *Mengzi* 34A.
- 28 Xia Liangsheng c. 1530, ch. 20.
- 29 They were bound variously: the Qing catalogue lists five versions in 32, 60 or 62 fascicles, in four or six cases. Yu Minzhong 1775, 9/11–12.
- 30 Oh 2013, 173.
- 31 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 59/7, story of Zheng Shutong 鄭叔通.
- 32 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 59/6–7, from *Songshi* 宋史, 459/1. Husbandly fidelity may have political overtones like wifely fidelity.
- 33 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 60/17.
- 34 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 60/26.
- 35 Ching 2013, 277.
- 36 That it is a royal family, exceptionally, which was portrayed as a group may underline problems with the view that the imperial family was 'the pattern and model of all families within the empire'. See Clunas 2013, 94. Ordinary wives could not be demoted to concubine, nor vice versa; imperial consorts could be shifted around. Ordinary sons inherited equally; there was only one throne.
- 37 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 59/4.
- 38 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 54/4. Ye Chunji 1570–4, 14/12–13 cites this case from *Wulun shu*.
- 39 Ni Qian 1493, 25/16–17 notes this unevenness of categories.
- 40 Zhu Zhanji 1443, Table of Contents 1–7.
- 41 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 7/1–8.
- 42 Zhu Zhanji 1443, Table of Contents 7–15.
- 43 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 51/7.
- 44 *MS* 2/24/335.
- 45 A mid-19th century primer includes the three terms together: ruler (*jun* 君), shown as originally having handlike elements on both sides of a box (*kou* 口), is explained as facing forwards, while both minister (*chen* 臣) and people (*min* 民) face right towards the sovereign. 'To recline' (*wo* 臥) is explained as depicting both ministers and ordinary folk kowtowing to the sovereign. Bai 2005, 131.
- 46 See *MSL Yingzong shilu* 179.13b (14/6/丙子), 206.7b (2/7/戊午), 209.3a (2/10/庚午); *MSL Xiaozong shilu* 132.7a (10/12/壬辰); *MSL Shizong shilu* 205.3a (16/10/乙卯), 205.2a (16/10/癸丑). Other bestowals: *MSL Yingzong shilu* 212.8a (3/1丙辰) (an official's wife); *MSL Yingzong shilu* 216/11a (3/5/戊辰) (a new county school); *MSL Wuzong shilu* 171/11a–b (14/2/辛卯) (replacement copy in Confucius's hometown); and *MSL Shizong shilu* 174/5b (14/4/己巳) and 180/6b (14/10/甲寅).
- 47 On Ke Qian, see epitaph by Wang Yu 王 (1422–95; js. 1451), in Xu Hong 1505, 13/11, who like Huang Zuo 1560–6 (16/16) adduces the gift to prove how good ruler–minister relations were then. On Wei Qi, see Mao Qiling c. 1690, 73/4. On Li Kui, see Xie Min and Tao Cheng 1731, 40/32.
- 48 Xu Hong 1505, 17/8. *DMB*, 1039–40.
- 49 Zhu Zaiyu c. 1600, 1/1.
- 50 Li Dongyang 1516, 38/21. See He 2013, 113–14.
- 51 Xia Liangsheng c. 1530, 12/77.
- 52 Kuang Yuche and Ren Chongyue 1984, 51.
- 53 Jang 2008, 169. Historian Chen Jian noted this use of *Wulun shu*

- and other court compilations. See Xiang Yannan 1993, 55. A 1467 memorial cites both *Wulun shu* and the *Veritable Records*. See *MSL Xiaozong shilu* 46.7b–8a (3/9/己卯).
- 54 Wei Jiao *c.* 1545, 16/25; Yang Yiqing *c.* 1526, 18/44. A government student and scholar mention the utility of the compilation. See Ke Shangqian 1545 14/8.
- 55 *MSL Yingzong shilu* 191.23b (1/4/癸卯), 192.4b–5b (1/5/己酉).
- 56 Wang Shu *c.* 1510, 8/15a. See also Yu Ruji *et al.* 1620, 68/4; and *MSL Xiaozong shilu* 12/1a (1/3/戊辰).
- 57 Memorial by Zhang Mou 章懋 (1437–1522), in Huang Xun 1551, 9/8.
- 58 Lu Can *c.* 1552, 5/7.
- 59 Qiu Jun 1620s, 7/50.
- 60 Ye Sheng 1465–72, 37/4, 7.
- 61 Jang 2008, 161, citing Sakai, *zōho Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū* 增補中國善書の研究, 81. Rather than prohibiting commercial reprints, the court occasionally tried to assure accuracy by fining sloppy printers, as in an order of 1523. See Jang 2008, 177–8. Thirteen years later, William Tyndale was hanged for printing a Bible in English.
- 62 *DMB*, 498–9.
- 63 Han Yong *c.* 1480, 11/1–2. *DMB*, 498ff.
- 64 *MS* 2/15/187; *DMB*, 877; Li Dongyang 1516, 39/12.
- 65 Zhu Zhanji 1443, 7/8; Li Dongyang 1516, 39/12.
- 66 Li Dongyang 1516, 39/12.
- 67 Li Dongyang 1516, 39/10–11.
- 68 de Bary and Huang 1993, 91–2.
- 69 Ni Qian 1493, 25/16–17.
- 70 See a brief mention in Lü Yuan 1480–1520, 10/6a.