The Sage and the Second Sex

Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender

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Introduction: Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?

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1

Confucianism has a reputation for its degrading and repressive attitude toward women and for its history of women-oppressive practice. If Confucianism is to remain a world philosophy and religion, it has to deal with this problem. A philosophic-religious tradition cannot have a future if it is hostile to half of the human population. Most curiously, however, leading contemporary Confucian scholars have been practically silent on this matter. Early contemporary Confucians in the twentieth century, such as Xiong Shili, Mou Zongsan, and Liang Shuming, had virtually nothing to say on this subject. In the 1990s, although most contemporary Confucians are for equal rights for women, there is little scholarship on this subject. At conferences where Confucianism is discussed, one often hears questions from the audience, usually from female scholars, asking about Confucian attitudes toward women. Answers given on these occasions have been typically unsatisfactory. The problem is, first of all, a lack of scholarship on this subject. Some Confucian scholars today may still feel that discussing feminist concerns is an "unmanly" thing to do and choose to stay away from it. Whether this lack is due to inadequate sensitivity or shortsightedness, it is extremely detrimental to the cause of Confucianism, which is going though the process of transforming itself and moving into a new millennium.

Feminism has so many forms that it defies a single definition. In this volume feminism is understood broadly as a movement that strives for sex equality between men and women. This general characterization of feminism would include in this category a large number of people who otherwise would not claim to be feminist because of its radical affiliation.[1] Quite understandably, feminists have been critical of Confucianism. But as Terry Woo points out, the affair between Confucianism and feminism in the last one and a half centuries has been one-sided, namely feminists criticizing Confucianism.[2] The question

for feminists now, however, is how to form a relationship with Confucianism. A radical feminist may not want to have anything to do with Confucianism. After all, Confucianism has played a role in victimizing women. Nevertheless, as Woo suggests, such a strategy may be ill-advised for the feminist causes. She argues for the need for feminists, particularly Chinese feminists, to come to terms with Confucianism. Moderate feminists may agree with Woo that a more constructive path is preferable in dealing with Confucianism. It may prove fruitful if both Confucianism and feminism take a step forward in building a new relationship. The question is: How can it be done?

2

Even though the term "Confucianism" has been commonly used to refer to a philosophic-religious tradition that is traced back to Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), there is no consensus on its exact definition. Some people have used it to refer to a state–sponsored systematic philosophy established during the Han time and continued through the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, which Ambrose Y.C. King has called "institutional Confucianism."[3] By this definition, there was no Confucianism before the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), even though Confucius and Mencius developed their core ideas several hundred years earlier. Others have used the term broadly to include not only the doctrines of certain scholars of the Han and later times, but also that of Confucius, Mencius, and Xun Zi. According to this usage, Confucianism existed both prior to and after the Han Dynasty. It should be noted that there is no exact Chinese counterpart of the English term "Confucianism." The Chinese term often used in similar contexts is "*Rujia* 儒家," literally the "family of the literati" or the "school of the literati." "*Rujia*," as compared to "*Daojia* 道家" or the "family of the Tao" and "*Mojia* 墨家" or the "family of Mo," was originally the name for the school of thought by Confucius, Mencius, and Xun Zi during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States period before the Han. The term has also been used to include its later developments. Scholars sometimes divide this tradition into several periods, such as classic *Rujia* 原始儒家, Han *Ru* 漢儒, and Song-Ming *Ru* 宋明儒 (宋明理學). If one uses "Confucianism" to refer to "*Rujia*," it certainly existed prior to the Han time. In this introduction, I use "Confucianism" as a rough English expression of "*Rujia*."

Gender segregation in the Confucian tradition started early in its long history. It is, however, not obvious that its founders, Confucius and Mencius, had an oppressive attitude toward women. Like their contemporaries, Confucius and Mencius were evidently not advocates for gender equality. When the *Analects* and *Mencius* mention women, it is often in the role of the mother. Under the idea of filial morality, both Confucius and Mencius give the mother equal status with the father in relation to children. But their attitude toward

women in general is mixed at best. In the *Analects*, Confucius comments on King Wu's ten able ministers:

> [The sage King] Shun had five ministers and society was well managed. King Wu said, "I had ten able people as ministers." Confucius said, "Is it true that it is difficult to find talent? The Tang [Yao]-Yu [Shun] period was a high time for talented people. [Among King Wu's ministers] there was a woman; so there were only nine people. [King Wu of Zhou] controlled two thirds of the country, but he still treated the Yin as the king. Zhou had the highest morals possible! (8.20)

Confucius says that, because one of the ten people was a woman, King Wu only had nine people as able ministers. Confucius apparently considers home, not politics, women's proper place. It appears that, for him, women do not count in politics.[4]

Yet another passage of the *Analects* tells a different story:

> Confucius went to visit Nanzi. Zilu was unhappy. Confucius swore: "If my behavior was inappropriate, then Heaven will abandon me! Heaven will abandon me! (6.26)

Nanzi was the notorious wife of Duke Ling of Wei. The passage does not indicate the purpose of this visit. But it was clearly a controversial act that even his top disciple Zilu expressed displeasure about it. Given Confucius's political ambition, it is likely that the visit was politically motivated in order to influence Duke Ling. If so, then Confucius must have thought women have some role in politics. Otherwise he would not have risked his reputation to visit her in the first place.

The most controversial passage on women in the *Analects* is probably this one:

> Only nüzi 女子 and petty people are hard to rear. If you are close to them, they behave inappropriately; if you keep a distance from them, they become resentful. (17.25)

Clearly here Confucius claims that certain people are difficult to deal with. The key question, however, is what "nüzi 女子" means. Some people have interpreted it to mean "women." If so, then Confucius here is degrading women: Why are women, not men, hard to rear? However, it is arguable that "nüzi 女子" was used in ancient time to mean "young girls" instead of women in general. For example, the eminent ancient Chinese language scholar Wang Li 王力 maintains that, in ancient times "zi" refers to "child" or "children," the "nü" before "zi" is an attributive, and "nüzi" means "female children."[5] Based on

this interpretation of "nüzi 女子," some scholars have argued that Confucius here is referring to servants (petty men) and maids, not women in general. After all, at other places in the *Analects* the word Confucius uses for women is "fu 婦" not "nüzi 女子." However, it is also a fact that "nüzi 女子" has been used in ancient times to refer to women in general.[6] Perhaps it is fair to say that Confucius's intention in that passage is unclear. What is clear is that this passage has been used in later days to degrade women.

Mencius advocated the Five Relationships:

> Love between father and son, duty between ruler and subjects, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and trust between friends. (*Mencius*, 3A.4)

However, he did not make it explicit what the husband–wife distinction should be. Scholars have generally believed that it is the idea that the husband's function is "external" whereas the wife's is "internal." This idea of distinction between the husband and wife is not particularly Confucian or Mencian, however, because it can also be found in such non-Confucian texts as *Mo Zi* 墨子 and *Guan Zi* 管子.[7] In another passage, Mencius says:

> The father teaches sons the way of good men; the mother teaches daughters about marriage. [When the mother] sends her daughter to the wedding, she would say "After getting married, you must be respectful and diligent, and do not go against your husband's will. Women's way is to obey." (3B.2)

This passage is probably the most "sexist" one in the entire book of the *Mencius*. Yet, it is more of a description of the then common practice than an invented doctrine. As Terry Woo suggests, Confucius and Mencius may be more properly judged as accomplices to the continued cultural minimalization of women, rather than inventors or calculated advocates of this practice.[8] If Confucius and Mencius did not change the social attitudes of their time toward women, their doctrines at least did not make the situation worse for women.

It is arguable that sexism became characteristic of Confucianism sometime after Confucius and Mencius died. The Han Confucian master Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 B.C.E.) maintains that, between the two principles that govern the universe, the *yang* and *yin*, *yang* is superior and *yin* is inferior. He said that "the husband is *yang* even if he is from a humble family, and the wife is *yin* even if she is from a noble family" (*Chun Qiu Fan Lu* 春秋繁露 Bk. 11, section 43).[9] Therefore, between the husband and wife, the husband is superior and the wife inferior. The degrading attitude toward women became extreme during the period of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism.[10] The neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) advocated the "Three Bonds," which emerged first not in Confucian classics, but in *Han Fei Zi*. The doctrine asserts the ruler's authority over the minister, the father's over the son, and the husband's over the wife. Commenting on whether poor widows could get remarried, another neo-Confucian, Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), said that it is a small matter to starve to death, but a large matter to lose integrity, implying that widows getting remarried are immoral, while it is all right for widowers to remarry (*Yi Shu*, Chap. 22). This degrading and oppressive attitude toward women translated into oppressive practice in reality. Under the doctrine of the Three Bonds, the abusive husband could easily turn the wife into a virtual house slave. During the Ming Dynasty the doctrine of "chaste widowhood" became an official institution. Women who kept their widowhood were officially honored and their families were exempt from official labor service. Thus, tremendous pressure was put on young widows not to remarry. The notorious practice of women's footbinding was also institutionalized during this period and lasted till the early twentieth century. If we use the term "Confucian China" as shorthand to refer to periods of Chinese history after the Han Dynasty when Confucianism played an influential role in society, it is justified to say that women have been oppressed and victimized in Confucian China.[11]

3

In the wake of the awareness of the history of Chinese women's oppression, a model emerged in the literature according to which Chinese women have been forever universally oppressed by men. The best image of this model is "Xiang Lin's Wife" under the pen of the eminent Chinese writer Lu Xun 魯迅. This poor woman, who does not even have her own name, suffers all kinds of hardships and bitterness and is victimized by all kinds of injustice. At the end, even her most miserable life-stories can no longer solicit sympathy from anyone.[12] It is questionable, however, if this "forever victimized Chinese women by men" model reveals the whole picture of gender relations in Chinese history, and if this model is too overly simplified to explain Chinese women's long-time apparent compliance with Confucians' demands on women. Some scholars argue that this model conceals the fact that Chinese women contributed a great deal to Chinese civilization; portraying them as mere passive victims and identifying them with backwardness and dependency distort the status of Chinese women in history. Others seem to defend Confucianism's record of its treatment of women and argue that Confucianism simply has not treated women as badly as has been portrayed. Thus, even though most scholars agree that Confucianism has oppressed women, they do not agree as to what extent women as a whole have been oppressed in Confucian China.

The degradation of women seems to have correlated with a long-held Chinese belief that there should be distinction between men and women. Zhu Xi advocates that the husband's right position is outside the home while the wife's position is inside the home (*Yu Lei*, chap. 68). To many, this distinction is a

matter of division of labor; it does not necessarily imply that one is superior and the other inferior. In his book *My Country and My People,* Lin Yutang maintains that

> Confucianism saw that this sexual differentiation was necessary for social harmony, and perhaps Confucianism was quite near the truth. Then Confucianism also gave the wife an "equal" position with the husband, somewhat below the husband, but still an equal helpmate, like the two fish in the Taoist symbol of *yin* and *yang*, necessarily complementing each other. It also gave the mother an honored position in the home. In the best spirit of Confucianism, this differentiation was interpreted, not as a subjection but as a harmony of relationships. [13]

According to Lin, these gender roles had been maintained because "women who could rule their husbands knew that dependence on this sexual arrangement was their best and most effective weapon for power, and women who could not were too dull to raise feminist problems."[14] He suggests that there are two sides of the issue of whether Chinese women were suppressed. On the one hand, men have been undoubtedly unfair to women (as Song–Ming neo–Confucianism evidences);[15] on the other hand, Lin claims, the deprivation of women's rights outside the home is "unimportant" compared with their position in the home:

> In the home the woman rules. No modern man can still believe with Shakespeare that "Frailty, thy name is woman.". . . Close observation of Chinese life seems to disprove the prevalent notion of women's dependence. The Chinese Empress Dowager rules the nation, whether Emperor Hsienfeng [Xianfeng] was living or not. There are many Empress Dowagers in China still, politically or in common households. The home is the throne from which she makes appointments for mayors or decides the professions of her grandsons.[16]

Lin argues that in real life Chinese women have not been really oppressed by men, though they have been oppressed by other women, namely mothers-in-law. Therefore, he concludes that "the so-called suppression of women is an Occidental criticism that somehow is not borne out by a closer knowledge of Chinese life."[17]

Lin is not alone in his opinion. For instance, Thomas Taylor Meadows, an interpreter in the British civil service stationed in China before and during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), wrote that, even though woman was still more of a slave of man among the Chinese than among Anglo-Saxons, the quality of her slavery was much tempered by the great veneration which Confucian principles require sons to pay both parents. Meadows noted that the government did not dare to refuse leave if an official, as the only son, required it in order to tend his widowed mother during her declining years; when a Chinese man

introduced his friend to his mother, the friend would perform the kow-tow ritual to the woman: he would kneel before her and touch the ground repeatedly with his forehead. The son would return the salute by kneeling and kow-towing to his friend:

> Thus, two men, and often, of course, grey beard men of high stations, will in China be found knocking their heads against the floor in honour of a woman of their own class in society. Add to this that if a mother accuses her son before the magistrate, the latter will punish him as a black slave is punished in an American flogging-house, i.e., without inquiry into the specific offence. The reader will conclude that this great social and legal authority of mothers in China must operate to raise the position of females generally; and this it does in fact: though in the contraction of their own marriages each is but a passive instrument.[18]

There is truth to this observation. Richard Guisso, who is critical of the Confucian *Five Classics* for their accepting and enshrining the earlier stereotypes of women in a patriarchal society, writes,

> If the *Five Classics* fostered the subordination of woman to man, they fostered even more the subordination of youth to age. Thus, in every age of Chinese history where Confucianism was exalted, the woman who survived, the woman who had age and the wisdom and experience which accompanied it, was revered, obeyed, and respected . . . even if her son were an emperor. It is perhaps this fact, more than any other, which enabled the woman of traditional China to accept for so long the status imposed upon her.[19]

Observations of this kind render support to Lin Yutang's claim that Chinese women have not been "really" oppressed. But they fall far short of justifying Lin's claim. Lin's account of Chinese women as a whole does not do enough justice to the historic facts of women's oppression by men. It is true, as suggested by Lin, Meadows, Guisso, and many others, that the mother had significant power in Confucian societies, but she had power as parent, not as woman. The issue of sex equality is about whether women as women are equal to men. And they were not. In a patriarchal society like Confucian China, women's oppression by men is undeniable. It is true that women had power inside the home, either as wife or mother. But this power is not nearly comparable to (ruling class) men's power in the society. Sex equality is about equality between men qua men and women qua women, which Chinese women simply did not acquire in Confucian China.

It should be noted that Lin Yutang was not a male chauvinist who blindly defended the Confucian patriarchal tradition. To the contrary, Lin may be well labeled an early Chinese feminist thinker, who fought against the tradition for women's equality.[20] Lin's remarks point out another side of the issue, indicat-

ing that the matter is not as simple as many have believed. One may argue that Chinese women were not as powerless as has been portrayed. This does not only mean that women, mainly mothers-in-law, had power inside the home; the fact that such females as Lü Hou 呂后 (241–180 B.C.E.), Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), and Ci Xi 慈禧 (1835–1908) ruled China with an iron hand indicates that Chinese gender relations could not have been merely a matter of men oppressing women.[21] The question, then, is how to give a holistic account of gender politics in Confucian China.

4

Confucianism must recognize not only the necessity but also the justice of sex equality. Instead of ignoring challenging questions raised by feminist thinkers, it must take them seriously and answer these questions adequately. The answer to the question of whether Confucianism and feminism can come to terms may be found in answers to the following questions: Is it accurate that the Confucian attitude toward women has been solely degrading and repressive? Is Confucian oppression of women a necessary implication of its general philosophy? Are there enough common grounds between Confucianism and feminism so that they may render support to each other in pursuing their causes? If historical studies show that, contrary to the common perception, women in Confucian China have been able to participate in social and moral functions in society to a certain extent that may be by no means satisfactory but can be greatly expanded, and if philosophical studies show that Confucianism and feminist thinking are in principle not incompatible, then it will not be a problem for Confucianism to come to terms with feminist thought.

The long time "one-sided affair" between feminism and Confucianism, as dubbed by Terry Woo, means that scholarship on women's status in Confucian China has not been a balanced one. Under the "forever victimized Chinese women by men" model, many writers seem to have felt that, in order to reveal the "evil" of Confucianism and the need for reform, one has to portray women in Confucian China as nothing more than pitiful victims. Nevertheless, prior to the rising of a more balanced scholarship on Chinese women in Confucian China by historians in the 1990s, there were a few works done in that direction. In a 1931 article, "Women's Place in Chinese History," the eminent historian-philosopher and foremost critic of the Confucian tradition, Hu Shi, argued that, despite traditional oppression, Chinese women have been able to establish themselves a fairly exalted position:

> Against all shackles and fetters, the Chinese woman has exerted herself and achieved for herself a place in the family, in society, and in history. She has managed men and governed empires; she has contributed abundantly to literature and the fine arts; and above all she has taught and molded her sons to be what they have been. If she has not contributed more, it was probably because China, which certainly has treated her ill, has not deserved more of her.[22]

Accordingly, Chinese women should not be characterized as mere pitiful victims who contributed nothing in history. Priscilla Ching Chung's study (1981) of power and prestige of palace women in the Northern Song period revealed how these women both fulfilled the Confucian role for women and enjoyed a level of power and prestige similar to that of their male counterparts. Commenting on the Confucian requirements for women, she writes,

> The obedient daughter, the faithful wife, the sacrificing mother, characteristics of the Confucian woman, are qualities any man would find ideal. Similarly, the woman would find ideal the obedient son, the faithful husband, and the sacrificing father. Therefore, the characteristics of the Confucian woman, rather being the average or the norm, are probably better thought of as the ideal.[23]

These studies have been primarily on elite women. Due to lack of available records, we know little about the real lives of women in the commoner's home. Nevertheless, these studies at least show that some aspects of Chinese women's lives may not fit well into their "nothing but oppressed victim" image.

A new trend of Chinese women scholarship started to take shape in the 1990s. In a 1992 article "Historical Roots of Changes in Women's Status in Modern China," historian Li Yu-ning writes, "Confucian philosophy itself was not exclusively antiwomen. It has its favorable as well as its unfavorable consequences with regard to the position of women."[24] She argues that some Confucian ideas have actually helped improve women's position. For instance, Confucianism did not attach importance to birth or social background, and Confucians believed that everybody could improve through education and self-cultivation. Because they also believed that the rules of *li* (禮 propriety) should be adjusted to changing times and circumstances, the respective roles of men and women were subject to change as conditions changed. Thus, according to Li Yu-ning, modern changes of Chinese women's status have their roots in the Chinese tradition, particularly the Confucian tradition.

In her pathbreaking work *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (1994), Dorothy Ko shows that literate gentry women in seventeenth-century Jiangnan were far from oppressed or silenced. Even though men had legal rights over family property and fathers maintained authority over women and children, the housewife as mother and educator of children was the de facto household manager, and thus had ample opportunities to influence family affairs. Thus, Confucianism's relationship with educated women was rather complex and ambivalent. Ko maintains,

> The power of the Confucian ideological and cultural tradition is at once a constraint and an opportunity for the privileged women. The constraints of the rigid gender-based parameters were most keenly felt by the women themselves. . . . Yet to speak of oppression and restrictions is to assume women to be extraneous to the Confucian tradition. Although this is true to some extent, it is more valid to recognize them as intrinsic to that tradition.[25]

Ko indicates that some of these women actively embraced Confucian values and took it as their own duty to resuscitate the Confucian way and to transmit it to the next generation. Their affirmation of the Confucian tradition, however, should not be interpreted as merely serving the interest of the patriarch. Borrowing from Foucault's notion of "power without the king" and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "dominated power," Ko suggests that even thoroughly patriarchal Chinese kinship systems and family relationships may not have been the workings of men alone, though the nature and degree of women's power depended on such factors as social positions, type of task, personal skills, and one's position in the life cycle.[26] She argues that the identification of Chinese women with backwardness and dependency has been associated with China's modernization movements; this image of Chinese women as victims was intensified during and by the May Fourth New Culture movement, re-enforced by the Chinese Communist Party's need to claim credit for the "liberation" of women, and readily accepted [and one may add, stereotyped] among Western readers. Ko concludes, "In short, the invention of an ahistorical 'Chinese tradition' that is feudal, patriarchal, and oppressive was the result of a rare confluence of three divergent ideological and political traditions—the May Fourth New Culture movement, the Communist revolution, and Western feminist scholarship."[27]

Susan Mann's study (1997) of educated Chinese women in the High Qing era (1683–1839) indicates that these women as writers enjoyed "remarkable satisfaction and gratification."[28] They used writing as means to preserve their values, to celebrate their admiration, and to lament their loss. These findings in part explain why elite women did not heed the calls for social change in the Confucian society of the High Qing era. Thus, by placing women at the center of High Qing history, Mann challenges

> a century and a half of scholarship (1843–1993) in which both Chinese radicals and Western missionaries saw Chinese women as oppressed victims of a "traditional culture" who were liberated only by education and values imported from the West. This assumption has locked the study of Chinese women in a response-to-the-West paradigm that most scholars in the China field thought they had since cast aside. Worse, it has forced an Orientalist view of gender relations on students of Chinese history for which Western scholarship is largely to blame.[29]

In *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (1998), Lisa Raphals finds that women in early China were often represented as intellectually adroit, politically astute, and ethically virtuous, directly countering the familiar image of Chinese women as eternally oppressed, powerless, passive, and silent. She suggests that serious attention to gender as a social construct calls for a reexamination of the tacit assumptions about philosophical activity in ancient China, which are often based on transhistorical generalizations, essentialized normative concepts, "Confucian" or otherwise. Raphals questions,

> Can we assume, for example, that the readers, writers and audience of Chinese philosophical works (however defined), at all times, were for men? Can we assume that references to "people" (*ren* 人), including a range of "sages" and "developed individuals" inevitably referred to men?[30]

Her study presents a negative answer to these questions.

These studies serve as a strong corrective to the common image of Chinese women as universally victimized in Confucian China. Following these studies, one has to think that ancient China, which is largely under the influence of Confucianism, while having been by no means fair to women, must have left some room for women's moral cultivation and social participation. Such room, however limited, may be expanded in the future as time changes.

5

If historical study shows how much room has been left for women in ancient China, philosophical analyses of Confucianism and feminism may reveal how much room Confucianism can extend for women. In order to see this, we must examine the philosophical aspect of Confucianism, finding out whether conceptually Confucianism is capable of accommodating women's equality.

In the 1990s, some authors started to note philosophical similarities between Confucianism and feminism. In his essay "The Confucian Concept of *Jen* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study" (1994),[31] which is included in this volume, Chenyang Li points out that Confucianism and feminism, though dissimilar in many aspects, do share similar ways of thinking in ethics. He outlines several parallels between Confucian ethics and care-oriented feminist ethics. First, as moral ideals, *jen* and care share an important similarity. Through an analysis of the Confucian concept of *jen*, Li argues that this concept carries a strong care orientation; both *jen* and care focus on the tender aspect of human relatedness. Second, in contrast to Kantian and rights-based moral theories, both Confucians and feminists advocate the human person as socially connected, not as disinterested, separate individuals. Third, both ethics

emphasize situational, personal judgment, character-building, instead of rule-following. Wary of rigid general rules, they both allow flexibility in moral practice and regard the ability to make moral decisions under particular circumstances an important aspect of a person's moral maturity. Finally, Confucian ethics advocates "love with gradations." Because the self is socially constructed and defined, a person has more obligations toward related or more connected ones than unrelated or less connected ones. Specifically, one's obligations toward parents and family members are greater than obligations toward others. Some feminists think along the same line. They argue that caring starts with people around the person, and then expends to people further away. Both agree that, without gradations, one would fail one's obligations toward people around oneself.

Li should not be interpreted as endorsing the argument that philosophical thinking or virtue should be gendered. He simply takes it as an indisputable fact that there are different ways of philosophical thinking and argues that some philosophies share similar ways of thinking. Indeed, that the hitherto male-dominated Confucianism shares with Western feminism similar ways of philosophical thinking shows that these ways of thinking are not sex- or gender-based. Therefore, Li is not advocating a theory of gendered virtue.

If the Confucian *jen* ethics has a care orientation, how could it have oppressed women? Li suggests that there are two ways to explain the apparent discrepancies between Confucianism's care-orientation and its women-oppressive history. One account is that Confucius and Mencius were not as degrading to women as later ones such as the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu and Song-Ming neo-Confucians were. The women-oppressiveness of Confucianism may be largely an add-on by later Confucians to the core doctrines outlined by Confucius and Mencius. Another account points to the restrictive application domain of *jen* in the Confucian tradition. Li suggests that, just like sexist interpretations of democratic principles in ancient Athens denied women political rights and racist interpretations of Christianity denied blacks brotherhood and sisterhood, sexist interpretations of *jen* and other core values of Confucianism may have been responsible for excluding women from fully participating in the Confucian project. It does not, however, necessarily imply that the concept of *jen* is sexist. Li concludes that, given these philosophical similarities between Confucianism and feminism, the two may render support to each other while pursuing their causes.

In his essay "Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self: Some Parallels and Their Implications" (1997), Henry Rosemont, Jr. notes some parallels between classical Confucianism and contemporary feminism similar to those outlined in Chenyang Li's 1994 article. Rosemont emphasizes that the difference between the philosophical style of Confucians and that of their European counterparts does not imply that Confucians are inferior; indeed, not much can be inferred from the fact that Confucians are not

masculine Westerners; to the contrary, that in Confucianism the ethical is not consistently distinct from the sociopolitical and the economic is a strength rather than a weakness.

While readily acknowledging that Confucius and his followers were sexist, Rosemont maintains that the thrust of this tradition was not competitive individualism, which is associated in the West with the masculine, but rather other-directed nurturing, which is associated throughout Western history with the feminine. He writes

> If sexism revealed in classical Confucian writings was characteristic only of gender structure (patterns of social organization), not of gender symbolism or gender identity, then it is at least possible that Confucian philosophy can be reconstructed to be relevant today, in ways that a great many feminist thinkers might endorse.[32]

Accordingly, the feminist demand for gender equality may well be brought into Confucianism without doing violence to its basic insights and precepts. Confucianism may be modified to accord with contemporary feminist moral sensibilities.

In her article on Confucianism and feminism (1998), Terry Woo suggests that Confucius was more an uncritical adherent of the traditional norms of sexual segregation and male authority than a misogynist and primary oppressor of women.[34] She takes the common thread of feminism to be, as Karen Offen puts it, "the impetus to critique and improve the disadvantaged status of women relative to men within a particular cultural situation."[34] But unlike Chenyang Li and Henry Rosemont, Woo seems to hold a more liberal interpretation of feminism, viewing it primarily as a force to fight for rights and individual choices. Because Confucianism emphasizes duty and self-cultivation, Woo maintains that Confucianism in its core values is at odds with feminism.[35] Nevertheless, like Lin Yu-ning, Woo sees two principles in Confucianism, namely an equal opportunity to learning and an attitude of openness and flexibility, which do not contradict feminism; in fact, these are where the two philosophies converge and are most able to reinforce each other. She concludes,

> After a hundred and fifty years of a relatively one-sided affair, and at this time when the issue of race or charge of racism is threatening the integrity of feminism, an appropriation of *jen* and a better understanding of the history of Confucianism might offer a sense of cultural recovery for Chinese feminists and a better understanding and inspiration for non-Chinese feminists.[36]

It is encouraging that the prominent contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming has also started addressing this issue. This may be an indication that the contemporary Confucian movement has finally started to take feminist concerns seriously and has finally realized the need of engaging in a meaning-

ful dialogue with feminism. In his essay "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships'" (1998), Tu differentiates the "Five Relationships" in Confucian Humanism and the "Three Bonds" in the politicized Confucianism.[37] The Five Relationships, first advocated by Mencius, are love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and trust between friends (*Mencius*, 3A.4). These are important elements of the Confucian Humanism. The Three Bonds, namely, the authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife, emerged in Confucian literature almost four centuries after Mencius's Five Relationships. Tu maintains that the psychocultural dynamics of the Confucian family lies in the complex interaction of these two ideals. Tu argues that the idea of the Three Bonds is a deviation from the spirit of Mencius's Five Relationships and therefore should not be confused with the latter. Unlike the conception of the husband–wife relationship in the Three Bonds, Mencius's idea of the distinction of the husband and wife is based on the principle of mutuality; the underlying spirit is not dominance but division of labor. According to Tu,

> It is not true that the Confucian wife is "owned" by the husband like a piece of property. The wife's status is not only determined by her husband's position but also by her own family's prominence. By implication, her ultimate fate is inevitably intertwined with the economic and political conditions of her children, both sons and daughters. While in the domestic arena, the husband's influence may also prevail, especially in extraordinary situations when vital decisions, such as the selection of tutors for sons' education, the wife usually wields actual power on a daily basis. . . . The Confucian wife is known for her forbearance, but her patient restraint is often a demonstration of inner strength. While her purposefulness may appear to be overtly and subtly manipulative, she has both power and legitimacy to ensure that her vision of the proper way to maintain the well-being of the family prevails; for the wife is not subservient to the husband, but is his equal.[38]

Nevertheless, Tu suggests that it may be simple-minded to completely separate the Three Bonds and the Five Relationships. He holds that the Five Relationships served as an ideological background for the Three Bonds and a sophisticated understanding of the Three Bonds must involve adequate appreciation of the Mencian conception of the Five Relationships.

Unlike Chenyang Li and Henry Rosemont, Tu does not directly address the key questions of whether such women-oppressive elements as the Three Bonds are necessary components of Confucianism, and whether Confucianism can move forward without this long-held baggage. A more focused study to this matter is needed. So far these philosophical studies are still preliminary But they have opened doors to further investigations that may help Confucianism come to terms with feminism.

6

In this volume ten articles by eleven authors are devoted to questions discussed in the two preceding sections. These authors are scholars in various fields: history, literature, philosophy, religious studies, Asian studies, and interdisciplinary studies. They present different views on the issue from different perspectives.

In the first chapter, Chenyang Li puts the issue straightforwardly in front of the reader by comparing Confucian ethics and feminist ethics. Li focuses on some important common grounds between Confucian *jen* ethics and care-oriented feminist ethics. He shows that both ethics have a similar understanding of self as socially constructed, both emphasize situational moral judgment instead of principle-oriented judgment, and both advocate differential treatment of care in moral practice; in terms of ways of thinking in ethical evaluation, *jen* and care share a common mode. A "feminist" turn of Confucianism, in the sense of striving for sex equality, may consist in recovering a Confucianism as Confucius and Mencius had it and in expanding its application domain of *jen* to women and men alike.

Joel Kupperman maintains that the deepest questions of feminist ethical philosophy have to do both with the ways in which roles or the expectation of roles enter into the formation of self, and with the choices about it which can or should be open. He argues that there is convergence between Confucian ethical philosophy and feminist concerns about social roles, rituals, and the formation or revision of self. Both Confucianism and feminism take seriously the ethical importance of becoming a certain kind of person and this implies reflection on ways of shaping oneself and also of shaping others to come. Both also have an orientation that emphasizes responsibilities. But there is also a major difference between the two: Whereas Confucianism pretty much bases itself on tradition, feminism opts for reforming tradition. Nevertheless, such historical baggage of Confucianism as hierarchical roles and gender relations is largely or entirely disposable; the essential insights of Confucianism can be formulated without it. Therefore, a case can be made that feminists and Confucians are singing from the same page, even though what they are singing tends to be very different. To the extent that feminist ethics remains like Confucianism, it is a Confucianism radicalized in important ways.

Philip J. Ivanhoe compares contemporary feminist ethical theories with the ethical theories of two prominent classic Confucian philosophers, Mencius and Xun Zi. He identifies two general forms of contemporary feminist ethical theory. The gendered virtue view maintains that, by nature, women have greater resources for and tendencies to see and appreciate ethical situations in terms of their particularity and context and in terms of interpersonal relationships. By relying primarily on their feelings and intuitions as opposed to objective, rational rule-following, women purportedly are able to make more reliable ethical

judgments. The vocational virtue view maintains that the distinctive ethical tendencies demonstrated by women are the result of the particular social roles and norms that women have been allocated under the systematic oppression of patriarchy. Ivanhoe argues that Mencius's and Xun Zi's ethical theories of virtue ethics respectively resemble these two views. Drawing on these resemblance, he concludes that a meaningful dialogue between Confucianism and feminism is possible in constructing a more adequate and just philosophical position.

David Hall and Roger Ames present a correlative understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese sexism as opposed to the Western dualistic understanding. While fully acknowledging the sexist characteristics of traditional Chinese philosophy in general and traditional Confucian philosophy in particular, Hall and Ames argue for the importance of understanding these characteristics under the correlative model. In the correlative understanding, gender is fluid and lacks exclusivity; the sexist problem is one of degrees of disparity rather than strict inequality; males and females are created as a function of difference in emphasis rather than difference in kind. Correlativity more easily promotes the redefinition of roles and gender characteristics than does the dualistic model. Therefore, even though in practice the weight of tradition is a formidable obstacle to the instantiation of such redefinitions, it is still plausible to assume that, in the absence of transcendental commitments to the contrary, alterations in practice may be more easily made if there are concomitant changes in cultural attitudes and practices that reinforce sexual inequalities.

Ingrid Shafer highlights the tendency of "both–and" rather than "either–or" thinking in Chinese traditions in general and Confucian tradition in particular. She argues for the convergence of Confucianism and ecofeminism. In the absence of Western spirit–matter and soul–body dualism, Confucian philosophy considers human beings not primarily as rational but distinguished by a conjunction of heart and mind, affection and reason, compassion and cognition, love and intellect. Ecofeminism emphasizes the harmony rather than conflict between humanity and nature. Given that the dualistic spirit–matter and soul–body thinking has contributed to the degradation of nature and the deterioration of the environment, the "both–and" thinking is in accord with the ecofeminist philosophy of nature and the ecofeminist environmental program. She maintains that Confucius emphasizes relationality and interdependence, places *jen* at the center of his teachings, and insists that words are empty without action. These all indicate the confluence of Confucianism and ecofeminism. She concludes that these characteristics make Confucianism an ally as well as a philosophical resource for the feminist ecological movement in building an environmental partnership ethics.

Pauline Lee's chapter focuses on Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), a Confucian philosopher of the Ming Dynasty, and compares his philosophy of sex equality with John Stuart Mill's. She argues that Li Zhi's view on husband–wife relationship bears a striking resemblance to Mill's as presented in his work *The Subjection of Women*. Both philosophers developed ideals of equal and mutually respectful spousal friendship. Although neither author was without limitations in his view of sex equality, their ideas were remarkable achievements of their times and can contribute to contemporary debates in feminism and ethics. Lee maintains that Confucianism has its own distinctive expression of feminism which focuses on self-cultivation. While liberal feminists view legal reform as the most effective tool for overcoming gender inequality, and Marxist feminists conceive of the subversion of capitalist social structures as the prime method for overturning the subjugation of women, Li Zhi, a Confucian feminist, understands the process of self-cultivation to be the most effective strategy for addressing the problem of patriarchy.

Paul Goldin examines the view of women in such early Confucian texts as the *Book of Odes* 詩經, *Guo Yu* 國語, and *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳. He finds that these sources both criticize vicious women and praise virtuous women, and they typically allow women to participate meaningfully in the Confucian project and reserve places in the pantheon of moral paragons for heroines as well as heroes. Women had not been considered inferior in the aretaic sense. Therefore it is misleading to bluntly say that Confucianism considers women inferior to men. Goldin presents three reasons why Confucianism has been repeatedly assailed as "sexist." First, the Confucian tradition only advocates the moral equality, not the social equality, of women. Second, the Confucianism of later stages has become more sexist and misogynic and has brought the bad name to Confucianism per se. Third, people often contrast Taoism, which apparently values the "female" principle, with Confucianism. They think that because Taoism values the "female" principle, it values feminine qualities, and hence values women, and that its opponent Confucianism values the "male" principle and therefore must degrade the "female" principle and hence degrade women. Goldin argues that this polarized interpretation of Taoism and Confucianism does not do justice to either.

Drawing on recent scholarship from China concerning the roles of women in ancient China, particularly Xia, Shang, and early Zhou, Sandra Wawrytko presents a perspective of women that is very different from later times. Her study of sexuality in early times reveals a picture of gender roles and relationships much more complicated than that of the stereotyped women in Confucian China. She suggests that during the early times in China, there was a Confucian–Taoist continuum rather than an opposition on the view of women. Her survey of sexuality throughout Chinese history shows that gynophobia, as a backlash to counter perceived female power, came later in history. This study sheds important light on the historical background of Confucianism and helps us understand early Confucians' attitude toward women.

In her article, Michael Nylan challenges prevailing stereotypes about elite women in early China, who are generally portrayed as untutored, weak or

vicious, the victims or the makers of unhappy fates. Because there are virtually no records of Han women in the common family, study of elite women gets us as close as we can to knowing Han women's status. Through a comparative study of ancient Greek and Han Chinese elite women, she points out the main problem in stereotyping ancient elite Chinese women: that limited prescriptions for women in classical Chinese (mainly Confucian) texts, prescriptions that were themselves the subject of considerable debate, have all too naively been read as accurate descriptions of women. She argues that the stereotypes of ancient China do not come from ancient historiographers but from relatively recent sources, namely the neo-Confucians and the May Fourth reformers, both of whom for different reasons preferred to assume the existence of rigid gender roles among cultured elites in antiquity, as well as the continuity of ultra-stable traditional Chinese culture. Her study shows that, just like Han elite men, Han elite women were lauded for their education, their physical courage, their loyalty to the family, and their attention to ritual.

Lisa Raphals's chapter is a combination of historic scholarship and philosophical analysis. It represents a voice that is somewhat different from the rest in this volume. She is critical of two approaches. One is a set of feminist attacks on Confucian patriarchy based on a kinship model, without reference to social structures outside of kinship. The other approach relies exclusively on a small set of "Confucian" canonical texts, with the premise that the statements in these texts transparently and authoritatively reflect Warring States and Han attitudes and social practice. Through an examination of the representations of women in classic literature during these times, Raphals shows that, while the historical Confucius's view on whether women can be educated or how they should be educated remains unclear, historical narratives from the Warring States and Han, such as *Gujin Renbiao* 古今人表 and *Lienü Zhuan* 烈女傳 represent women as possessing the same capacities for wisdom, practical intelligence, and moral reasoning as men do. She argues, however, this testimony cannot be extended to Confucianism. Although the authors of these narratives are Confucians, it does not mean that the stories they represent are Confucian. Specifically, she maintains, "Confucian ideologies and social practices from the Later Han through Song and Ming-Qing neo-Confucianism overwhelmed the earlier pattern of an ungendered approach to wisdom and the capacity for moral judgment." Based on her findings of ungendered moral representations of ancient Chinese women, Raphals criticizes the "feminist" theories of gendered virtue or gendered ethics and various attempts to interpret Confucianism based on similar views.

Let me say that the authors in this volume do not hold the same view on the issue of Confucianism and feminist concerns. What they share in common is a belief in the importance of this issue. Clearly, none of these authors denies that Confucianism has oppressed women, none regards this oppression as excusable, and none thinks it acceptable for Confucianism to continue this practice.

They may give different answers to the question of whether and how Confucianism and feminism can come to terms with each other. Some of these articles, however, show that, despite its oppression of women in general, Confucianism has left room, though very limited, for women's moral and personal growth in a mostly Confucian society, and that there is important convergence between Confucian ethical thinking and feminist ethical thinking. These observations can serve as a starting point for Confucianism to address feminist concerns, and for Confucianism to eventually come to terms with feminism. Some of these essays are provocative, for sure. The hope is that they will open to more engaging, more meaningful, and more fruitful discussions and dialogues among interested scholars.

Notes

1. See Christina Hoff Sommers, 1994.
2. Terry Woo, 1998.
3. Ambrose Y.C. King, 1993.
4. For a different reading of this passage, see Paul R. Goldin in this volume.
5. Wang Li, 1981.
6. I thank Paul R. Goldin for bringing these uses to my attention.
7. For a discussion of this distinction in *Mo Zi* and *Guan Zi*, see chapter 8, "*Nei-wai*: Distinction between Men and Women," Lisa Raphals, 1998.
8. Terry Woo, 1998.
9. Some scholars have questioned whether ancient texts such as *Chun Qiu Fan Lu* are authentic. For instance, Sarah Queen, 1996. Based on such questions, some may argue that there is no solid evidence that Dong Zhongshu actually degraded women.
10. Ch'en Heng-che has argued that this change toward oppression of women was a result of Buddhist influence from India. Even if this is true, it was still the neo-Confucians who incorporated the women-oppression element into the Confucian tradition. See Ch'en, 1992.
11. Of course, it does not mean that women fared better during the periods when Confucianism lost its prominent status to other schools.
12. Lu Xun, 1969, 87–101.
13. Lin Yutang, 1939, 139.
14. Ibid.
15. Lin criticized that the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians "had drifted a long way from the sane and healthy humanism of Confucius and turned it into a killjoy doctrine." See Lin, 1935, in Li Yu-ning, 1992, 34–58.
16. Lin Yutang, 1939, 145.
17. Ibid.

18. Quoted from Yang Lien-sheng, 1992, 17. This passage was originally taken from pp. 634–35 of Thomas Taylor Meadows's *The Chinese and Their Rebellions*, published in 1856. No location was given.
19. Richard Guisso, 1981, 60.
20. This is evident in his 1935 article "Feminist Thought in Ancient China."
21. See Yang Lien-sheng, 1992.
22. Hu Shi, 1931, 15.
23. Priscilla Ching Chung, 1981, 109.
24. Li Yu-ning, 1992, 102–122.
25. Dorothy Ko, 1994, 17.
26. Ibid., 11.
27. Ibid., 3.
28. Susan Mann, 1997, 225.
29. Ibid., 222–223.
30. Lisa Raphals, 1998, 3.
31. Chenyang Li, 1994.
32. Henry Rosemont, Jr., 1997, 63–82.
33. Terry Woo, 1998, 110–147.
34. Ibid., 111.
35. Ibid., 137.
36. Ibid., 138.
37. Tu Wei-ming, 1998, 121–136.
38. Ibid., 132–133.

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