

CONFUCIUS AND WOMEN

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COMMON VIEW OF CONFUCIANISM

- This 'school of scholars' (*rujia*) – which we have come to know as 'Confucianism' or the Confucian school – sometimes called Ruism – is commonly viewed as a **patriarchal, hierarchical system responsible for oppressing Chinese women**
- The May 4th Movement of 1919 blamed Confucianism for holding China back – and women epitomized oppression
- **Yet Mr Science and Mr Democracy were hailed – not Madam Science and Madam Democracy!**
- It was not only Chinese society that oppressed women
- **Language itself – East and West – reveals bias against women**
- Even a revolution is trapped in its own cultural construction of gender. So was the West with its privileging of Mr & Man as the default terms for Person

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CONSTRUCTING GENDER

Source: Video - China's Confucian Society

See also *Confucian Weekly Bulletin* (11.5.15)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMQWu10GOr4> (from 15:20 mins)

The "Traditional" Role of Women in China



		
Good (a women with child is good)	Peace (when a women stays at home there will be peace)	Slave (a women does repetitive tasks)

The "Traditional" Role of Women in **America**



		
Mother (a women with child is good)	Homemaker (when a women stays at home there will be peace)	Slave (a women does repetitive tasks)

SO WHY DID LANGUAGE DEVELOP THIS WAY?

Society & Culture

- Woman = a kinship term in premodern China
 - A woman in a patrilineal system was seen as daughter, wife & mother – preferably of male descendants who would maintain the family line & conduct ancestor worship
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DID CONFUCIUS AGREE WITH THIS TRADITION?

'I transmit but do not innovate'

- Confucius said: 'I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to [Zhou] antiquity.' (*Analects*, 7.1)
- But Confucius, in being 'truthful' to antiquity, did bring about changes to the society in which he lived.

Innovation in breaching class distinctions but not gender

- One innovation was that Confucius would not confine his teaching to those of noble birth. He said: 'In teaching, there should be no distinction of classes.' (*Analects* 15.39)
- (Hence emphasis on meritocracy, leading to imperial examination system.)
- However, this did not apply to women, just as Greek democracy when it developed in 5th C BCE did not apply to women either.

WHAT DID CONFUCIUS SAY ABOUT WOMEN?

Socially: Very Little

- On Roles & Expectations in family or society – very little
- It was up to Confucian scholars to apply concepts from Confucius and Mencius for women & their education.

The *Analects for Women* in Tang Dynasty

- Two of these scholars were Tang Dynasty women: sisters Song Ruohua & Song Ruozhao. Ruohua wrote the *Analects for Women* & and Ruozhao propagated it.
- 'To be a woman, you must first learn how to establish yourself as a person.'
- (Song Ruohua, in De Bary & Bloom 1999, p. 827)

IS WHAT CONFUCIAN SAYS – OR OMITTS TO SAY – ABOUT WOMEN TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY?

Not if you read this:

- 'Only women and petty people (*xiaoren*) are difficult to handle. Be close to them and they are not humble, keep them at arm's length and they complain.' (*Analects*, 17.25)
- Even if Confucius was sexist – or simply unhappy with his marriage (see below) – does this mean the Confucian school of thought (*Ru*) is inherently sexist?

Aristotle was no better

- ' . . . the worth of Confucian Ethics should not be decided based solely on the lack of an explicit reference to women as virtuous *junzi* in historical narratives. Otherwise, the same critique can be applied to almost all prominent Western philosophers, such as Aristotle [**woman = deformed male**], Kant and Nietzsche . . . ' (Rosenlee 2006, p. 120)

WHAT WERE THE PERSONAL INFLUENCES ON CONFUCIUS?

Raised by a Single Mother

- Confucius was probably born out of wedlock to a teenage mother.
- His father was a military officer who died when Confucius was 3.
- His mother, to whom he was deeply devoted, died when he was 17. He mourned her with rites & showed filial piety.
- At 19 he married, and became a father of a son and two daughters
- Did not get on well with his wife and children.

Idealising the family

- Was Confucius compensating?
- 3 of the 5 Key Relationships are family ones:
 1. sovereign to subjects
 2. father to son
 3. husband to wife
 4. older brother to younger brother
 5. friend to friend

ULTIMATELY, CONFUCIUS IDEAS WERE NOT GENDER-SPECIFIC

- **REN 仁 = VIRTUOUS PERSONHOOD**
- This is an achieved virtue through self-cultivation within inter-relationships leading to the concept of humaneness.
- We realize each other through reciprocity in social relations.
- So achieving personhood is an ethical journey (not ontological).
- In theory *ren* is not gender-based, but the social structure of the times was biased against women achieving their full potential as persons. Their inter-relationships were proscribed. How to achieve *ren* in these circumstances?
- Is the 21st Century more conducive to the pursuit of *ren* for women? Confucianism is coming of age.

THE BROADER VIRTUES OF RECIPROCITY & APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

Shu - reciprocity

- 'Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire' (*Analects*, 15.24)
- Often seen as interchangeable with *ren*.
- *This virtue would be highly beneficial to promoting gender equality*

Li - ritual

- The concrete expression of *ren* through informed behaviour.
- The informed acts of non-sexist behaviour and using gender neutral terms would also help in promoting gender equality

JUNZI = EXEMPLARY PERSON

- *A junzi has ren*
- Becoming a fully realised human need not be associated with a particular gender (See *Confucian Weekly Bulletin* 24.4.15)
- Yet junzi is typically translated in the West as 'gentleman'. Gender neutral terms are: **Exemplary person** or **morally noble person** or **morally cultivated person**.

NEW VERSION OF RECTIFICATION OF NAMES

Old Version: name should fit role

- Confucius is asked about government by a certain Duke Jing of Qi.
- Confucius replied: "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son."
- The Duke replies to Confucius: "Splendid! Truly, if the ruler be not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there be grain, would I get to eat it?"
- (*Analects* 12.11)

New Version for Modern Society

- The reality of a woman's role in modern society needs to be reflected by the language used.
- Thus she can be a *junzi* – but we cannot call her a 'gentleman'.
- All the Confucian concepts need to take into account the language used so that women are not misrepresented. In this way the name or term used will not be looked upon as an anachronism – and Confucianism will not be dismissed as irrelevant to modern society.

WHAT ELSE NEEDS TO BE RECTIFIED?

Division of Labour

- Nei-Wai – inner-outer
- Gender based division of labour – men in the outside world, women inside the home - would no longer be relevant.
- Greater flexibility of arrangements

5 relationships – how might these be construed and renamed?

1. sovereign to subjects
2. father to son
3. husband to wife
4. older brother to younger brother
5. friend to friend

Greater flexibility of relationships with husband and wife also incorporating friend-to-friend relations (see Rosenlee 2006,p.158)

YIN & YANG

- There are concepts which transcend time and can be used for rectification of roles. A powerful one is Yin-Yang:
- It is a correlative idea - non-gendered & not oppositional.
- More to do with complementarity & reciprocity – rather than domination & submission
- Achieving personhood (*ren*) through relationships - interactivity.
- The Western masculine-feminine dichotomy is dualistic.



TU WEI-MING: CONFUCIANISM IS NOT GENDER SPECIFIC IN TERMS OF ACHIEVEMENT

- 'No question about who can become a priest or not, who can become a sage or not, who can become an educated person, teacher, philosopher, a leader, a political leader or a religious leader.
- 'It is a historical factor that a lot of habits at the heart of the Confucian tradition are very detrimental to feministic ideas of human flourishing, for example the idea of the division of labour between domestic and outside.
- 'That can be changed, but it's painfully difficult. China is changing more rapidly than, say, Korea. And the whole question about leadership, can we imagine a woman sage, there is no difficulty for me to imagine a woman sage.
- 'Can we imagine a woman president? A woman as leading authority on Confucianism? I don't have any problem with imagining or accepting or even encouraging that.'
- (Tu, *Philosophy Now*, Issue 23)

THE CHINESE DREAM

- President Xi Jinping spoke of the Chinese Dream as the 'great renewal of the Chinese nation' after he was elected General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012.
- He further explained that the dream 'after all, is the dream of the people.'
- So, too, it is the dream of women.
- (see All-China Women's Federation website)



<http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/17/1222-1.htm>



Image credit: wikimedia.org

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