CONFUCIANISM, WOMEN, AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

In recent years, there have been many discussions of the relation between Confucianism and sexual equality. Such discussions are not only of scholarly importance, but also practically significant. However, most of these discussions focus mainly on textual interpretation. In this article, I intend to show that solely concentrating on textual interpretations of Confucian classics is not sufficient for revealing the relation between Confucianism and sexual equality, and that the implications of Confucianism for women’s status cannot be appropriately understood without examining its social context. The same philosophical texts might mean something very different under very different social conditions. A philosophy like Confucianism that emphasizes social roles and responsibility functions very differently in a democratic society than in a totalitarian society. By putting Confucianism in particular social contexts, this article concludes that Confucianism may be androcentric and promote sexual inequality in a patriarchal society in which sexual inequality is taken for granted, but can be a very valuable resource for contemporary feminist philosophy and have positive impacts on women’s liberation in a contemporary democratic society in which sexual equality has become a shared value.

I. THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONFUCIANISM FOR SEXUAL EQUALITY IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

A very efficient way to investigate the implications of Confucianism for women’s status in a patriarchal society is to examine how Confucianism historically functioned in traditional China and how it has functioned in present China in regard to women’s status. China was and still is a patriarchal society. Therefore, the way Confucianism functions in China in regard to women’s status can, to a great degree, reveal the way Confucianism may function in this regard in patriarchal societies in general.

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As is well-known, the infamous oppression of women in traditional China was one of the worst in human history. Foot-binding and polygamy were among the most sexist practices in China’s past. Even today, sexual discrimination prevails in China. Although women’s status has been greatly improved in contemporary China, women’s inferior position is still widely assumed without question. For instance, in many areas of rural China, model women are still supposed to be those who obey men, do all housework, and have no claim in important decisions. Very often, women cook when there are guests, but they are not supposed to sit together with guests to enjoy a dinner when their cooking is done—they are supposed to sit somewhere else as someone insignificant. This is the so-called dictum “women do not sit at the table” (nüren bu shang zuo 女人不上桌). In cities, it is very common in a family that the wife takes care of housework in order to let the husband succeed in his career.

Even in professional and academic areas, in general women either have no opportunity to succeed as well as their male counterparts or receive no equal recognition when they attain equal achievement as their male counterparts. One of the showcases for this is the main stage (zhuxi tai 主席台) of various conferences where important or well-established persons are supposed to sit: Very often there is no Chinese woman or almost no Chinese women invited to sit at the main stage. Worse than that, there is rarely any challenge to such a practice. Conference participants (both men and women) take it for granted. The usual justification for excluding women from the main stage is that the women who attend such a conference are not as established as the men at the same conference. But this justification does not work to disprove the existence of severe sexual discrimination in China. First of all, if it is indeed true that Chinese women are so overwhelmingly less successful than men, this can only prove how oppressed women have been in China. Second, it is not actually true that all men who sit at the main stage of a conference are more established than all women who sit below the main stage. Women’s achievements are easily overlooked in China.

To deny severe sexual discrimination in China, some have argued that Chinese women are actually more powerful than Chinese men, since they can control their sons or husbands and therefore indirectly control Chinese society. However, this claim is not well grounded. First, most Chinese wives cannot control their husbands, nor can most Chinese mothers control their sons, as far as important decisions are concerned. In most cases, Chinese women’s impact on their husbands or sons is mainly on those matters in their men’s daily lives—not on important decisions in their professional and political lives. Even if there are women who actually have great influence on their husbands
or sons in important issues, their number is very small. Furthermore, even if such women can have social and political impact on their society through their men, their influence is dependent on their men’s willingness to allow it.

The fact that these women have to exercise their power in society through their men in itself shows that women are not equal to men in power. In political and professional areas which are socially crucial, men in general occupy more important positions than women and have direct control of power in these areas. Although, historically, there were a couple of female rulers who had greater power than any man in their times, they were exceptions. Their stories only demonstrate what women were capable of doing, but not how equal women and men were. This is true of today’s China. The denial of sexual inequality in past and present China has resulted either from an epistemological flaw—overlooking the whole picture of Chinese women’s status but focusing only on exceptional or minority cases—or from the interests of some Chinese men who want to keep their advantageous position over women.

In such a Chinese social context, what are the implications of Confucianism for women’s status? This question cannot be answered without a careful examination of the Confucian view of women and some general characteristics of Confucianism. We may start with a discussion of early Confucianism. By “early Confucianism” I refer to pre-Han Confucianism, the most important parts of which are the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius.

In the Analects, there are only two comments directly related to women. In one place Confucius says: “Only women and petty men are hard to be with. If you are close to them, they become disrespectful; if you keep a distance, they become resentful” (wei nüzi yu xiaoren nanyang ye, jinzhi ze buxun, yuanzhi ze yuan 唯女子与小人为难养也, 近之则不孙, 远之则怨).² This comment usually has been regarded as obvious evidence for Confucius’s low opinion of women.³ However, in order to lighten or dismiss the sexist flavor of this passage, some contemporary commentators have tried various interpretations. One of these is to replace “women” with “female children” in the passage so that the passage no longer seems to look down on all women.⁴ But the essential problems remain. Why does Confucius single out “female children” but not “male children” as an object of criticism? Does not that show that Confucius thinks that the female is inferior to the male?

Another way to interpret it as less sexist is to replace “women and petty men” with “male and female servants.”⁵ But this is too far from the original text. Even if “petty men” in the Analects may be used to refer to domestic servants, “women” cannot be used in that way. Also,
such an interpretation makes the text very trivial. Why would Confucius talk about male and female servants in this way? Some have argued that this passage seems not really to be against women, since it does not say that women cannot be nourished (if “yang” is translated into “nourish”), but only that they are hard to cultivate. Furthermore, as a matter of fact, Confucius has never said that men are easy to cultivate either. But, again, such interpretation does not show that Confucius respects women and men equally. Why does he choose to say that “women,” not “men,” are hard to nourish? Does not that show that he thinks that women are inferior to men? Although he does not say that men are easy to cultivate, by overtly saying that women are hard to cultivate without saying the same thing about men, he implies that women are harder to nourish than men and therefore inferior to men.

In another place Confucius says:

[The sage king] Shun had five ministers and society was well managed. King Wu said: “I had ten able people as ministers.” Confucius commented, “It is difficult to find talented ones, isn’t it? The times of Tang [Yao’s dynasty] and Yu [Shun’s dynasty] were very rich in talent. [Among King Wu’s ministers] there was a woman, so there were only nine people.” [wuwang yue: “yu you luanchen shiren.” Kongzi yue: “cainan, buqi ranhu? Tangyu zhiji, yu si wei sheng, you furen yan, jiuren eryi.”] This comment usually has also been regarded as having a strong sexist flavor. Although King Wu counted his female minister among and regarded her as an equal to the other nine who were men, Confucius did not. It seems to Confucius that women are not persons in the same sense as men are. That is why he thinks that King Wu only had nine talented people to work for him. Sexual equality is not an idea shown here. Some contemporary scholars disagree with this interpretation and have argued that this comment of Confucius is not sexist at all. On the contrary, according to these scholars, this comment shows that Confucius acknowledges women’s ability to deal with public affairs and indicates that he believes that women are equally as talented as men. But such an argument has a difficulty in explaining why Confucius said “there were only nine people” instead of saying “there were only nine men.” If Confucius believed that men and women are equal, he would have said “there was one woman, so only nine men” instead of saying that “there was one woman, so only nine people.” If one argues that by “people” or “persons” Confucius actually refers to men, then one is saying that Confucius does not regard women as persons. That will create even a bigger sexist problem for Confucius. Also, in the text, “so there were only nine people” (九人而已) is what
Confucius emphasizes—stressing that King Wu only had nine talented ministers. If he did not intend to exclude the woman from the group of ten ministers, he would not need to express himself in this way.

Having said all of this, I do not mean that disagreements in interpretation over these two comments related to women in the *Analects* can be settled easily. This article actually is not intended to be deeply involved in such textual debates. Since there are so few mentions of women in the *Analects* and we are not even sure up to now if these few mentions of women were really Confucius’s, concentrating our investigation on these few passages in the *Analects* will neither draw any decisive conclusion about Confucius’s views of women nor reveal the implication of Confucius’s doctrine for women in a patriarchal China. It will be more productive to examine the major ethical ideas of the *Analects* in relation to gender issues in their social context.

In the *Analects*, virtues such as *ren* (humanity, benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety), *zhi* (wisdom), *xiao* (filial piety), *ti* (brotherly love—love and respect for one’s elder brother) are what Confucius discusses most. However, he does not equally speak for both women and men, but takes men as the norm. The moral cultivation and perfection that Confucius teaches are basically about how a man should live. When he talks about *xiao*, although he does advocate being filial to both one’s father and mother, he more often mentions what a filial son ought to do, and how important it is for one to follow one’s father’s will. When he talks about *xiao*, although he does advocate being filial to both one’s father and mother, he more often mentions what a filial son ought to do, and how important it is for one to follow one’s father’s will. When he talks about the rectification of names, he says: “Let the ruler be ruler, the minister be minister, the father be father, and the son be son.” The virtue of *ti*, advocated by Confucius, is just about how younger brothers should treat their older brothers, not about how they should treat their older sisters. In the entire *Analects*, there is no saying about the right way to treat sisters and daughters. Clearly, what Confucius was concerned with is men’s morality.

Similarly, in the *Book of Mencius*, morality for men is the main concern and men are still the norm. When Mencius states the Five Relationships, he clearly gives more importance to men than to women. These five relationships concern “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.” The first one stated here is about the relationship between father and son but not between son and mother, daughter and father, or daughter and mother. As far as the second one is concerned, Mencius did not specify in what way the “distinction between husband and wife” should be made. But, given his approval of the distinction between husband and wife that prevailed in his time, he
clearly meant that the husband participates in public affairs outside
the home while the wife is in charge of domestic matters.

Mencius is well known for believing that everyone can be a sage.
He does not deny women’s ability to be virtuous. However, he does
not have the same criterion of virtue for both men and women. For
him, the core of female virtue is obedience. Here is what he says:

When a young man comes of his age of 20 as an adult, his father gives
him advice; when a girl marries, her mother gives her advice, and
accompanies her to the door with these cautionary words, “when you
go to your new home, you must be respectful and circumspect. Do
not disobey your husband.” It is the Way of women to take obedience
as the norm.14

Clearly, he is not just describing women’s common practice of obedi-
ence at his time but also approves and advocates it, and regards
obedience as the most important virtue of women. This is made even
clearer if one continues to read what he says immediately after these
words on women’s virtue.

A man lives in the spacious dwelling, occupies the proper position,
and goes along the highway of the Empire. When he achieves his
ambition he shares these with the people; when he fails to do so he
practices the Way alone. He cannot be led into excesses when
wealthy and honored or deflected from his purpose when poor and
obscure, nor can he be made to bow before superior force. This is
what I would call a great man [da zhangfu 大丈夫].15

This is a picture of an ideal moral man. No one has ever doubted that
these sentences, which are parallel to those about women’s virtues, are
normative. For centuries, these words have been widely recited and
have become moral inspiration for both Chinese men and women to
maintain moral integrity regardless of circumstances. However, if one
reads Mencius’s sayings in context, we can see easily that they are
addressed to men and meant to set up the moral standard for men
only. And, even if we just carefully read these words literally, we can
find that this is the case as well. These words are about “da zhangfu,”
while “da zhangfu” in Chinese literally means “adult man” or
“husband.”

Furthermore, if we investigate the social function of Confucius’
and Mencius’ doctrines in patriarchal China, the implications of early
Confucianism for sexual equality will become clearer. Given its
endorsement of the existent labor division between men and women
in a patriarchal society, its emphasis on the importance of hierarchy
and role-playing actually greatly helped to defend and justify sexual
inequality. Undoubtedly, early Confucianism did not discriminate
against women as much as later Confucianism did in justifying the
oppression of women. In general, its justification for sexual inequality is implicit rather than explicit. It is later Confucianism that overtly proposed that women are inferior to men as yin is inferior to yang,\textsuperscript{16} and that women should follow three kinds of obedience (obeying father, husband, or son).\textsuperscript{17} However, the undeniable and more severe sexism in later Confucianism is the outgrowth of the implicit sexism in early Confucianism, not a departure from or betrayal of early Confucianism.

Confucianism—both the early and the later form—emphasizes an individual’s social role and his/her relationships with others. According to the Confucian theory of the rectification of names, each person should do his duties well according to his role in family and society. Otherwise, one is not entitled to his name such as “father” or “ruler.” Confucians are well known for stressing the significance of five relationships in moral life. As Chung-ying Cheng points out:

\begin{quote}
Given the five relationships, an individual will define himself only when he enters himself into these relationships and develops the proper virtues regarding them. In other words, an individual will realize his potentiality for good only when he fulfills what is fitting and proper in these relationships.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

To play one’s social role well and to handle relationships with others properly is required for all Confucian virtues and is the key to being a Confucian moral person. Ren requires one to love all in accordance with relationships; xiao requires one to love and serve one’s parents; ti requires one to love and respect one’s older brother; li requires one to act and think appropriately according to one’s social position; and yi requires one to do what one ought to do according to one’s social role and relationships with others.

These Confucian ideas reveal many truths about the essence of morality, and most of them are not in themselves sexist at all. But, if we put them back into the historical and social context in which they were first proposed and closely examine what kind of social roles, hierarchy, and criteria for propriety they presuppose, it will not be hard for us to see their sexist implications. In particular, what has been presupposed by early Confucianism is the patriarchal understanding of these issues. What has been taken for granted by early Confucianism is the existent sexual division of labor and patriarchal criteria for morality according to which the proper role that women should play is only that of mothers and wives who ought to stay home and serve their husbands and parents-in-law, and take care of children and housework. Given such an understanding of the proper role of women in society, to justify and emphasize the moral significance of appropriately playing one’s role is to justify and intensify the oppression of women.
This may be illustrated clearly by the following example: Provided a master’s control over his servant is morally taken for granted in a particular society, to morally justify and emphasize that both the master and the servant ought to play their roles well in that society is not only to morally assert and approve the master’s control over his servant, but also to justify and strengthen such control by encouraging the master’s better control over his servant and the servant’s better obedience to his master. When women are in the position of men’s servants, to make playing one’s role appropriately the most important part of morality is actually to make women’s subordination the most significant moral requirement. Given the context in which Confucianism functioned in China, it is not implausible to conclude that historically Confucianism was androcentric and contributed to the oppression of women in China. Moreover, in any patriarchal society in which women’s subordination is taken for granted, the advocacy of Confucianism will be as damaging as in China for sexual equality. The key point is this: Once a philosophy that emphasizes role-playing and hierarchal distinctions among people combines with a social context in which women’s inferiority is taken for granted, this philosophy will serve the oppression of women. It is not surprising that Confucianism was a state philosophy and orthodox ideology in patriarchal China for over two thousand years.

For many, it is hard to accept that great Chinese sages such as Confucius and Mencius have discriminated against women. But, they forget the fact that Confucius and Mencius were human beings who lived during certain historical periods. Like other great thinkers in human history, they have their limitations. A philosophical attitude toward the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius requires critical reflection on them. Such reflection will lead not only to a search for what is great in their philosophy, but also to an examination of where it is problematic or even wrong.

II. The Implications of Confucianism for Sexual Equality in a Democratic Society

The function of a certain philosophy is contextually determined. To say that Confucianism is androcentric and has negative impact on sexual equality in a patriarchal society is not inconsistent with to believe that Confucianism can ally with feminist philosophy and promote women’s liberation in a democratic society.

In different cultural and historical conditions, androcentric philosophies may take very different forms. For instance, in the West,
individualistic philosophy is part of androcentric ideology, just as communitarian thought is in China. According to contemporary Western feminists, in modern Western philosophy, male biases are disguised with the concept of the abstract and universal agent and the pursuit of universality and objectivity. As many feminist philosophers have pointed out, the norm of the subject and individual in modern Western philosophy (since the Enlightenment) is actually male. Traditional Western philosophy focuses on the individual agent and holds that the agent is autonomous and can be completely impartial. It values rationality and abstraction, and devalues emotion and the concrete. Although the merit and historical role of such philosophy in promoting the individual’s development and human rights are obvious, it has its own limitations. It fails to take women’s experience into account and devalues those traits commonly associated with women. Due to the existence of male domination, male norms have become dominant and been regarded as objective and universal standards for all. Accordingly, those traits, experiences, and perspectives commonly associated with women have been considered something inferior and invalid. Regardless of whether men and women actually have different ways of knowing and reasoning, it is male-biased to devalue those traits that people usually associate with women, such as being caring, emotional, and intuitive. It is in this sense that the self or individual in mainstream Western philosophy is male-biased, and the individualism derived from such philosophy is not gender-free.

Due to wide acceptance of individualism as such in the West, it is very common for people in Western societies to believe that they are independent of others and that each individual should be totally responsible for taking care of herself. Overestimating the individual’s independence in the West, especially in the United States, has contributed to increasing the number of broken families. Although both men and women suffer from such a consequence, women suffer more. For example, although single-parent families are generally poorer than both-parent families, single-mother families are financially even much worse off than single-father families. Furthermore, there are many more single-mother families than single-father families in the United States. Since interdependence between people is a reality, to deny it means either hurting those who need others’ care the most or letting part of the population take more responsibilities than others. In present-day America, although individualism is a norm, women in general actually take care of others more than men do. Women, even successful career women, are still primary caretakers in most families. Therefore, in reality, generally speaking, the more individualism is emphasized, the less freedom and more responsibilities women have. In this sense, individualism in the West is androcentric, or at least it
functions that way. To overcome such sexism, it is necessary to emphasize the social nature of the individual and appreciate those traits commonly associated with women. No wonder contemporary feminist philosophy has discussed caring and responsibility so much and made great efforts to bring people’s attention to such aspects of ethics. In this context, Confucianism can definitely support feminist philosophy.

In a society in which individualism and sexual equality are greatly emphasized and people’s roles in family and society rarely are discussed, a philosophy such as Confucianism that emphasizes the individual’s social role and the importance of the family may not harm women, but promote better relationships and harmony between men and women, and urge people to do their duties well. For example, given the equal status of mother and father at home, to emphasize that each person should play his or her role well is to emphasize that father, not just mother, should fulfill his role as a father and share equal responsibility in taking care of his children. That is why Confucius’s theory of the rectification of names that exhorts each person to do his or her duty well in order to match his or her title is often well received in classrooms in the United States as a positive doctrine.25 Obviously, as long as Confucians today abandon those sexist assumptions about women from patriarchal societies and accept the idea of sexual equality prevailing in modern democratic societies, their philosophy will be beneficial to sexual equality.26

It has been noticed that there are remarkable similarities in ethics and epistemology between Confucianism and contemporary Western feminism.27 Many characteristics associated with feminist ethics and epistemology are also presented in Confucianism. Like contemporary feminist philosophy, Confucianism not only emphasizes caring and the social nature of the individual, but also values the significance of emotions and intuitions in moral development and knowledge. For instance, for Confucianism, moral sentiments are crucial for moral development, moral judgment, and moral perfection.28 Confucian virtues such as ren, yi, li, zhi, xiao, and ti all require appropriate feelings and attitudes. In Mencius’ philosophy, moral sentiments such as the Four Beginnings (Siduan 四端) are so important that they are what differentiate human beings from other animals and what make morality possible.29 Also, early Confucians often appeal to people’s shared emotions and intuitions in their attempts at persuasion. In their works, philosophical ideas are often expressed in the form of aphorisms, apothegms, allusions, and illustrations.30 Those Confucian philosophers, especially Mencius, used analogical arguments more often than any other means of persuasion.31 By doing so, they have effectively appealed to people’s basic intuitions and common senti-
ments. Obviously, Confucian philosophers believe in the power of emotion and intuitions and value their role in both ethical and cognitive activities.

Male biases in Confucianism are concentrated in its specific interpretations of its basic concepts and its endorsement of sexual hierarchy, but not in its basic concepts and structures themselves. For example, to emphasize relationships in itself is not androcentric, but regarding the relationship between men and women as unequal and making obedience to the existing sexual hierarchy a virtue for women are androcentric; to advocate propriety (li) in itself is not androcentric, but considering certain sexist behavior and rules appropriate is androcentric. If feminists today provide new interpretations of those basic Confucian concepts such as ren, yi, li, and zhi, and put them in a contemporary context in which sexual equality has been widely accepted as a norm (even if sexual equality has not been a reality), they will greatly benefit from studying Confucianism. Also, the Confucian appreciation of the significance of emotions and intuitions in ethics and epistemology may help to demonstrate that those traits commonly associated with femininity should not be devalued.

Emphasizing relationships and appreciating emotions and intuitions are usually regarded as “feminine” in the West, but they are important characteristics of Confucianism, a philosophy that was solely established by males and historically androcentric in China. This phenomenon seems to indicate that those so-called “feminine” traits have more to do with social conditions rather than sexuality and gender. Confucian philosophers value those “feminine” traits not because they are naturally more feminine than men in the West, or as feminine as women in the West, but because they live in a family-centered society and their philosophy is the product of that society. Although Confucian men were not primary caretakers in their families, their existence was so entirely dependent on their families that they could not do anything without them. Their social conditions enabled them to consider family-related issues much more than modern Western male philosophers.

In some sense, women in the contemporary West live under similar conditions as Confucian men, as far as their dependence on family life is concerned. Although in general contemporary Western men’s lives are relatively less dependent on family and less family-oriented, lives of their female counterparts are still family-centered. Contemporary Western societies are like what Youlan Feng calls a “society whose socialization of production dominates its familization.” In such a society,

... a society-based mode of production breaks through the walls of family, and completely liberates men (from family) but not women.
... The reason why women are not completely free from family is
that their responsibilities as mothers are not less than before; because they have to raise up their children by themselves and have no other alternatives. \(^{33}\)

Since women are still primary caretakers in contemporary Western society, they in general handle various family relationships and various issues related to family life more often than men. Therefore, they often pay more attention to relationships and give more appreciation to emotions and intuitions than men. Obviously, their doing so is not directly due to their sexual makeup but is because of their close ties to family life. Similarly, the family-centered society makes Confucian men value those “feminine” qualities and issues.

However, Confucianism does not regard these so-called “feminine” qualities as feminine. For Confucianism, caring about relationships and valuing emotions and intuitions are desirable human traits but not associated with women. In their own terms, Confucians would never have considered their philosophy feminine. This clearly shows that the criteria for masculinity or femininity are culturally decided, although in different societies such criteria may overlap. This also explains why, unlike Daoism, Confucianism does not prefer femininity over masculinity, although it embodies some traits that are associated with femininity in the Western sense. Nevertheless, no matter whether those Confucian characteristics such as caring about relationships and emphasizing responsibility in family and society are labeled as “feminine” or “masculine,” they can be used to promote the feminist cause in a democratic society.

How much Confucianism—a native Chinese philosophy—may help with the current feminist cause in the contemporary West is partially dependent on whether it can be accepted under current social conditions of Western societies. Individualism has prevailed in the West for several hundred years, because it grows from and fits there. But, the emergence of new communitarian philosophies, especially contemporary Western feminism, and their increasingly being accepted indicate that traditional individualism is no longer adequate in the West, and that community-oriented philosophy may be helpful for solving some social problems faced by contemporary Western societies. In this context, Confucianism without its presuppositions about social and sexual hierarchies may promote sexual equality and serve as good medicine to cure social ills caused by excessive individualism in the West.
An earlier version of this article was presented at the meeting of the Association of Chinese Philosophy in America, Pacific Division, the American Philosophical Association, Pasadena, March 21, 2008. I would like to express my appreciation to Xianduan (Judy) Shi for her helpful comments and my audience for their very stimulating discussion at the meeting. I would also like to thank Galia Patt-Shamir, Jiuyuan Yu, and Kathie Jenni for their valuable inputs to and suggestions on drafts of this article. I am especially indebted to Professor Chung-ying Cheng for his insightful and helpful comments and suggestions on the last draft of the article. Additionally, I am also grateful to Banta Center for Business, Ethics and Society at the University of Redlands for awarding me a research grant for working on this article.

1. By “traditional China,” I refer to pre-Communist China.
2. *Analects* 17:25, my translation. All translations of Chinese texts quoted in this article are mine unless indicated otherwise. However, others’ translations are consulted for my translations.
3. For a representative expression of this kind of opinion, see Cai Shangsi, *Kongzi Sixiang Tixi* 《孔子思想体系》(Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 1984), 246–47. For a very recent discussion of this passage, see Li Ling, *Wo Du Lunyu: Sang Jia Gou* 《我读<论语>：丧家狗》(Taiyuan: Shanxi People’s Press, 2007), 309; Wu Xiaoming, *Wu Dao Yi Yi Guanzhi: Chongdu Kongzi* 《吾道一以贯之：重读孔子》(Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003), 280–90. It is worthy to note that Wu has convincingly shown that the opposite of women and petty men in this passage are virtuous men (nanxing junzi 男性君子), and they are superior to women and petty men (see Wu, *Wu Dao Yi Yi Guanzhi*, 281–82).
7. “Luan chen” here refers to those ministers who were able to overcome chaos and bring order to society. See Li Ling, *Wo Du Lunyu: Sang Jia Gou*, 172.
11. It has been argued that both of Confucius’s passages that mention women may be later interpolations, and therefore they may not reflect Confucius’s view of women at all. See Raphals, “Gendered Virtue Reconsidered,” 226; and E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 177 and 240.
16. See Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, *Chunqiu Fanlu*: “Yang Zun Yin Bei” 《春秋繁露：‘阳尊阴卑’》.
17. See *Li Ji*: “Xiao Te Sheng” 《礼记·“致特牲”》. Lisa Raphals has argued that a hierarchical distinction between *yin* and *yang* and the explicit *yin–yang* male–female analogies did not occur until the end of the second century and the beginning of the first century BCE. It is in *Chunqiu Fanlu* and *Liji* that such a hierarchical conception of *yin–yang* and its association with men and women first clearly emerged and then
become dominant in the later Confucian tradition (see her “Yin and Yang,” in Sharing the Light [Albany: State University of New York, 1998], chapter 6, esp. 142 and 168). According to Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, yin yang wuxing cosmology was not incorporated in Confucianism until the late Qin and early Han when Confucian commentaries attached to the Yijing were compiled (see her Confucianism and Women [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006], 62). She has also argued that in the appendices of the Yijing there is the idea of venerable yang and base yin and that Dong Zhongshu’s hierarchical ordering of the yin–yang is consistent with the former, but he explicitly associated women with yin and claimed the inferiority of women (ibid., 56). This means that from the moment when Confucians incorporated yin–yang cosmology into the Confucian tradition, they valued yang more than yin and put yin and yang in unequal positions. What I would like to add is that Confucians’ devaluing yin is inconsistent with Chinese yin–yang cosmology. According to such cosmology, yin and yang are two ontological contraries that exist in everything and make all changes and production possible. They are opposite but dependent on each other. Cosmologically, they are equally significant. Given the equal status of yin and yang and the assumption that man–woman is one of the yin–yang pairs, this cosmology implies that men and women are equally valuable and important. (For more detailed discussions of the yin–yang theory, see Yu-lan Fung [Feng Youlan 冯友兰], A Short History of Chinese Philosophy [New York: Macmillan, 1948], 138; Chung-ying Cheng, New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucianism [Albany: State University of New York, 1991], 95; and Xinyan Jiang, “The Law of Non-Contradiction and Chinese Philosophy,” History and Philosophy of Logic 13, no. 1 [1992]: 3–4. For a comprehensive discussion of the linguistic origin and the philosophical meanings of yin and yang in early China, see A. C. Graham, Yin–Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking [Singapore: Institution of East Asia Philosophies, 1986], Occasional Paper and Monograph Series No. 6.)

18. Chung-ying Cheng, New Dimensions, 156.
19. “Modern Western philosophy” refers to mainstream Western philosophy that has been based on Cartesian epistemology and Enlightenment rationalism.

In this article I have no intention to enter the current debate on whether there are indeed unique female perspectives, morality, or traits, so I only talk about those traits that people usually associate with females without asserting that they should be associated with females.

22. According to the most recent statistics (based on 116,011,000 households), in 2007 the median income in the United States was $72,785 for a married couple household, $49,839 for a male household family (no wife present), and $33,370 for a female household family (no husband present) (see U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, and U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty, Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007, August 2008, 15).
23. In 2007, among 116,011,000 households, there were 14,404,000 female household families, but only 5,100,000 male household families (ibid.).
24. The fact that in the United States there are many more single-mother families than single-father families partially shows that women are taking more responsibility to raise children than men; the increasing number of children in poverty in the United States also partially shows how badly children have been hurt by undesirable family situations. According to the official statistic, “In 2007, both the poverty rate and the number in poverty increased for children under 18 years old (18.0 percent and 13.3 million in 2007, up from 17.4 percent and 12.8 million in 2006). The poverty rate for children was higher than the rates for people” (ibid., 20).
25. This is based on my teaching experience.
26. Although by “sexual equality” I mean equal respect and equal opportunity for men and women, not that men and women do exactly the same work in all areas, I do think that the traditional division of labor between men and women is incompatible with sexual equality. Given current social conditions, a housewife who has no income usually cannot be respected and valued as much as her husband whose income supports his entire family. Equal respect presupposes equal opportunity outside the home and equally important roles in family and society.

27. Chenyang Li has discussed the similarity between Confucianism and the feminist ethics of care. See his “The Confucian Concept of Jen.”


29. For Mencius’ ideas of the Four Beginnings, see the Book of Mencius 2A:6. For the most detailed discussion of Mencius’ philosophy, see Kwong-loi Shun, Mencius and Early Chinese Thought (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

30. This is one of the general characteristics of Chinese philosophy. For a detailed discussion of this, see Fung, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, 11–13.


32. It has been argued in Western feminist literature that women care more about relationships and responsibility. The best-known arguments for this were made by Carol Gilligan (see her In a Different Voice [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 6–22); the ethics of care has been regarded as a typical feminist ethics, although not all Western feminists think that women naturally care about others more than men. Among others, Nel Noddings’s Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) is a very influential work on the topic.

33. Yu-lan Fung (冯友兰), Sansong Tang Quanji 《三松堂全集》, vol. 4 (Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press), 263.