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The *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*’s (JCP) special issue on “Femininity and Feminism: Chinese and Contemporary” (2009) could be seen as a sequel to its special edition on “Feminism and Chinese Philosophy” (2000). Although constructive comparative studies on the intersection of Confucianism and feminism go as far back as Chenyang Li’s pioneering piece on Confucian *ren* and care ethics published in *Hypatia* (Li 1994) and Henry Rosemont Jr.’s comparative study of Confucian and feminist relational selves (Rosemont 1996), their impact is still by and large limited to sinologists and specialists in Chinese philosophy. The vibrant comparative feminist studies in the 2000 and 2009 special
issues of the JCP contrast greatly with the deafening silence in mainstream feminist philosophy regarding the relevance of Chinese philosophy to women’s liberatory movements. As Terry Woo wrote in 1999, the relationship between Confucianism and feminism “has largely been a one-sided affair: feminists criticizing the status and treatment of women determined by Confucianism” (Woo 1999, 110). Contemporary feminists, if they engage with Confucianism at all, have not changed their negative assessment of Confucianism. For instance, in a rare engagement between a Western feminist and Confucianism, in The Ethics of Care Virginia Held briefly but decisively rejects the compatibility between care ethics (as well as feminism) and Confucianism (Held 2006, 21–22; see also Rosenlee 2008). This state of affairs, where Chinese specialists see close alliances between Confucianism and feminism, whereas mainstream feminist scholars ignore or, worse, pre-emptively dismiss such alliances without much acquaintance with Confucianism, raises a number of troubling issues. First, what defines feminism or feminist theory? Second, what is the use of philosophy to feminist liberatory movements? And last, what is the worth of non-Western philosophy (Chinese philosophy) to feminism? Simply put, should the readers of Hypatia, a journal of feminist philosophy, take seriously the special issue of the JCP on comparative feminist studies?

Obviously, there are countless definitions of feminism or feminist theory. But despite these variations, the disputes among feminists regarding which theory best addresses the problem of women’s oppression do not automatically cast doubt on the feminist status of a given Western theory. Take the dispute regarding the efficacy of care ethics as an example; its detractors, such as Martha Nussbaum and Claudia Card, might challenge the usefulness of care ethics in addressing women’s problems, but by and large, care ethics is assumed to be a viable form of feminist ethics, a serious contender worthy of close consideration. Indeed, care ethics and feminist ethics can even be conflated. This conflation can be seen in the JCP’s first article, Vrinda Dalmiya’s “Thoughts on Comparative Care Ethics.” Despite her keen awareness of the two main objections to care ethics—what she terms the “No-Exit Objection” and the “Domesticity Objection” (196–99)—Dalmiya, in her effort to assess the merit of the similarities between Confucian ren and care ethics, uses “feminist theory” and “care ethics” interchangeably, whereas the feminist status of Confucius ren is constantly in question. Naturally it begs the question: what makes care ethics feminist, whereas Confucian ren (comprehensive care), which is quite similar to care ethics, is not? Of course, being similar to care ethics does not automatically make Confucian ren feminist, but that still does not answer the question of what makes a theory or ethical stance feminist. One might point to many differences that still exist between Confucian ren and care ethics, but I fear that, at the end of the day, care ethics is feminist simply because its proponents say so, whereas Confucian ren is not simply because of its non-Western origins. Paralleling
Beauvoir’s analysis of gender relations, where man represents both the right and the neutral, Western theory is positioned as both the rightful player and the judge in the field of feminism, and hence any fruitful alliance between Confucian-inspired ethics and feminism immediately becomes suspect.

Feminist suspicion of non-Western feminism, or of what Dalmiya terms “indigenous feminism,” is rooted in the danger of being easily co-opted by conservative, nationalistic efforts. As Dalmiya writes, using India as an example, “Postcolonial attempts to revitalize the Hindu tradition in India consequently become ‘Trojan horses of the Hindu right’” (206). In order to avoid the same pitfall of the Hindu revitalization of women’s lives in India, Dalmiya cautions visionaries of “Asian” feminist movements to consider the impact of a revitalized Confucianism on Chinese women’s lives. As she notes, “a revival of a theoretically revised tradition needs to worry about how such reclamations affect the fabric of social life on the ground” (207). In other words, for Dalmiya, the potential adverse effect of Confucian feminism as applied to Chinese women’s lives is much more threatening than the theoretical disputes over whether Confucianism is or is not feminist. As Dalmiya concludes, “It would be wise to remember that while the comparative feminist philosophy project may ‘pique the intellect,’ ultimately, feminisms cannot be generated from our armchairs” (208). Here Dalmiya seems to distinguish feminism from feminist theory. But if so, then whether East or West, Confucianism or care ethics, what is the use of philosophy to feminist liberatory movements? We are now back to square one: what then is feminism?

If one understands “feminism” etymologically as a study of feminist thought, then any vision and articulation with regard to women’s oppression can be termed as feminism. The mere verbal dispute, however, is not what interests Dalmiya, as she repeatedly stresses the danger of a revitalized, non-Western tradition coined in a progressive idiom (205). To conceive a “feminist” possibility in classical sources, as Dalmiya puts it, may “pique the intellect,” but the ultimate test is how it affects women’s lives on the ground. The potential impact of a revitalized, non-Western tradition is obviously assumed to be adverse. It is, however, perplexing to me why such a worry is not present whenever Western canonical sources are invoked in feminist writings. For instance, Aristotle’s sexist remarks on women are no less appalling, but that does not prevent Martha Nussbaum, a contemporary feminist, from revitalizing Aristotelian tradition in her capacities theory. In fact, as Dalmiya points out in the beginning of her essay, “Pointing out the misogynist statements that Aristotle makes about women would, for example, be an odd critique of Nussbaum’s capacities theory!” (192). Also, as Dalmiya acknowledges, contemporary feminists such as Iris Young often publicly “raid” Western sexist texts to further their feminist theorizing (192). I am wondering why such a borrowing cannot be applied to non-Western canons as well. Yes, Confucian texts, just as Hindu scriptures, carry potent symbolic meanings to natives, and much of what has been done in their name is harmful to women,
but there are also great wells of untapped resources within Confucianism that one can use to further women’s liberatory movements. Or, to borrow from Annette Baier as she reflects on some feminist impulses to discard all Western canonical texts, “To dismiss as hopelessly contaminated all the recorded thoughts of all the dead white males, to commit their works to the flames, could be a self-defeating move. At the very least we should ... examine each work we are tempted to burn to see if it does contain anything that is more worth saving than patriarchal metaphysics” (Baier 2000, 20). I believe no less generous a spirit should be applied to non-Western canonical texts as well.

Yet, the obvious absence of non-Western philosophy in mainstream feminist scholarship attests clearly to the de facto practice that feminism and Western philosophy are defined synonymously. But if such a self-imposed limitation is lifted, then there is no reason why one cannot be a Confucian and a transnational feminist at the same time. In all fairness, Dalmiya does leave room for such a possibility as she reflects on a Confucian-based care ethics: “There seems then no a priori reason to rule out imagining a Confucian feminist care ethics based on a uniquely different notion of care” (203). But such an imagined possibility can come to fruition only if Confucianism is seen as on par with Western canonical literatures in terms of their relevance to the contemporary world. The colonial dichotomy between the progressive West and the tradition-bound, sexist non-Western world must be abandoned. Yes, the danger of being co-opted by conservative, nationalistic efforts is real, but discarding the entirety of native traditions is not the solution either. Unless we are ready to admit that native traditions have nothing to offer to the contemporary world, including resources for gender equity, we must then be willing to take the risk in revitalizing native traditions. However, tradition, as tradition, must evolve in accordance with its changing material conditions. There is nothing contradictory about changing a certain aspect of tradition and cherishing one’s native tradition at the same time. All traditions change over time, and a native tradition becomes frozen in time only when its natural dynamism is disrupted in forced contrast with the West, a self-defining progressive vision for the rest of humanity. Colonial politics should not repeat itself in feminism. For this world is not just composed of “Europe and the people without history,” as cautioned in Eric Wolf’s anthropological study where Europe through its expansion dictates not just the future trajectory of the world, but also the way in which the human past is understood (Wolf 1982/1997). History is then written in a language of segregation, where the culture of the inferior must first be assessed and then reconstituted in accordance with the image of the superior West. If this imperialistic remnant is to be overcome, then it must be possible to construct viable non-Western alternatives as a competing vision of a progressive future for humanity.

However, revitalizing non-Western canons such as those of Confucianism is motivated less by some sort of parochial, nationalistic pride than it is an act of
broadening the scope of feminist liberatory movements. For a hybrid feminist theory based on Confucian ren, in my view, is neither Eastern nor Western; instead it is a blended possibility intended to help women think through their own lives and find alternatives to existing patriarchal sociopolitical structures. Is Confucian ren alone able to address all women’s problems? Not likely. But then, no ethical theory is able to do that. Yes, the bottom line, as Dalmiya points out, is to better the lives of women. But it is not just Chinese women’s lives that are at stake here. Confucius is not just a Chinese philosopher studied by the Chinese only; instead, just as is true of Kant, Confucianism is part of a wider human tradition. And just like Western canonical sources, Confucianism can also function as a well of resources for all sorts of progressive projects, including feminism, despite its obvious textual and historical misogyny. After all, what is philosophical activity for if it is not to generate new ideas out of the old and to tease out the possibilities of a given idea at hand?

With this long preliminary discussion of the relevance of non-Western philosophy to feminism in mind, now we can begin to appreciate all the contributing articles in this special issue of the JCP. Including Dalmiya’s article, the JCP has eight articles on the theme of “Femininity and Feminism: Chinese and Contemporary,” roughly grouped into pairs that deal with the core comparative subjects: Vrinda Dalmiya and Ann Pang-White on care ethics; Xinyan Jiang and Galia Patt-Shamir on women and Confucianism; Lin Ma and Robin Wang on Daoism and femininity. Sandra Wawrytko’s piece deals with Buddhism and the illusion of gender, and last, Linyu Gu offers a concluding piece on feminism.

In addition to Dalmiya’s comparative studies on care ethics, Pang-White’s “Reconstructing Modern Ethics: Confucian Care Ethics” intends to use Confucian ethics as a corrective to the over-emphasis on autonomy and non-interference in mainstream ethical theories, which, in Pang-White’s view, are inadequate for dealing with contemporary social problems such as poverty and geriatric care (210). Jiang’s “Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts” and Patt-Shamir’s “Learning and Women: Confucianism Revisited” examine the complex intersection of Confucianism and women’s oppression. Despite Confucianism’s historical and textual entanglement with sexism, Jiang emphasizes the usefulness of Confucian characteristics such as caring relationships and familial responsibilities when applied to a democratic society (239), whereas Patt-Shamir opts for a more “liberal” reading of Confucianism where one’s commitment to the Confucian ideals of family and learning applies equally to both men and women (258). Ma’s “Character of the Feminine in Levinas and the Daodejing” attempts to construct a philosophy of the feminine where women’s specificities could be considered in their own right; thereby such a philosophy can provide a synthesis to the ongoing debate between “equality feminism” and “feminism of difference” (262). Wang’s “Kundao: A Lived Body in Female Daoism” offers a
rare look at the feminine form of spirituality as articulated by the female Daoist master, Sun Bu’er. Through her translation and analysis of the text, *Kundao*, Wang illustrates the affinity between Sun’s work and Iris Young’s “lived body,” where the body is more than a passive vehicle for a disembodied mind; rather it is a transformative site for higher conceptual reasoning and spiritual understanding (291).

Wawrytko’s “Buddhism: Philosophy beyond Gender” seeks to transcend gender identity into the non-discriminating mind of Buddha, where all physical phenomena, including sexed bodies, are viewed as illusions. The lesson that Buddhism offers is that women’s liberatory movements must go beyond gender identity, which is only one of the many delusional manifestations of the discriminating mind; full awakening to the egalitarian future of Buddhism is the key to liberation (308). Gu’s “Waiting for Godot? Contemporaneity, Feminism, Creativity” concludes the special issue with her reflection on the endless waiting for the promise of a better future that never comes. Instead of waiting for the ultimate ideal, Gu urges both men and women to seek “creative harmony” or “harmonious creativity” (329), as envisioned in the *yin/yang* cosmology of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), where discrete separateness of individuals is replaced with dynamic harmony of *yin* and *yang*. For the future is now, as both men and women work together to navigate through the troubling waters of gender inequality.

As noted earlier, whether one finds these comparative feminist studies useful or applicable to the contemporary world will depend on one’s conception of what constitutes feminism. In other words, comparative feminist studies can get off the ground only if one believes that there is something useful and relevant that one can learn from non-Western traditions; otherwise, non-Western feminism would be a contradiction in terms. In short, whether feminism can go beyond the neocolonial politics of the progressive West vs. the oppressive non-Western world will determine the worth of non-Western philosophy to feminism. My hope is that feminism, with its intent of abolishing women’s oppression, can make use of all conceptual resources in human traditions, be they from East or West, North or South.

REFERENCES


Emanuela Bianchi

With regard to Greek culture ... I think that we are trying to find the crossroads at which we have taken the wrong path.— Luce Irigaray, “The Return”

The crossroads—the place of fate, encounter, event, decision, and opportunity—is an apt figure for this important new volume on the work of Luce Irigaray. In one breath the collection announces a desire for a return to a certain origin, but before that breath is done we are clear that difference, impropriety, catachresis, and the impossibility of return are figured into that very desire. In tracing these impulses the many essays that make up the text undertake a certain, and very necessary, working through. What then, of the “right path” alluded to by Irigaray? We might recall the crossroads where Oedipus committed that originary and fateful parricide so determinative for the patriarchal Symbolic, a three-way crossroads that according to Greek lore was ruled by the chthonic goddess Hecate, she of the three ways. If a wrong path was indeed taken there or elsewhere in “Greek culture,” this volume reminds us that the thought of a right or correct “feminine” path is itself plural and not straightforward.

The question of a return to origins, indeed the question of the possibility of such a return and the possibility of origin itself, are questions that themselves arise at a very particular crossroads in twentieth-century thought, namely that between Freudian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian phenomenology—the very meeting point where Irigaray’s thinking of sexual difference flowers, and where her feminist engagements with the myths, tragedies, and philosophical texts of ancient Greece have taken place. Heidegger uniquely raised the question of the