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<i>ADDITIONAL NOTES</i>	

Confucianism Reimagined: A Feminist Project

Written by Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee

With the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States, the contemporary feminist movement entered an unprecedented, uncertain territory, with some questioning the movement's viability in the age of Trumpism¹. A presidential candidate who made his fame and fortune in part through the business of beauty pageants that objectify women and young girls, and whose comments revealed on the infamous Access Hollywood tape were accompanied by a string of sexual assault allegations, was nevertheless elected. This stunning election outcome dealt feminists not only a devastating defeat but, more importantly, a practical challenge: how do feminists fight misogyny when the person holding the highest office in the land embodies it overtly in his conduct as well as in his rhetoric? The answer to that question would not be retreat or silence. I, for one, would stand up and continue to project a feminist future where cultural inclusivity is the proper way forward for women of all colors. For me specifically, an inclusive feminist future will also be a Confucian hybrid. In sum, I am proposing a Confucian-feminist hybrid in order to add to the ever more expansive portrait of a transnational feminist theory.

David Hall and Roger Ames's early works² on the issue of gender within the Confucian tradition brought attention to this aspect of Confucianism, which was often neglected by sinologists who saw the issue of gender as either irrelevant or insufficiently philosophical to the study of Confucianism, not unlike the way in which feminist scholarship was routinely marginalized in the West³. Despite feminists' own very best efforts, the field of philosophy has largely rejected the inclusion of gender as an integral part of the discipline; its rejection is clearly reflected in the actual practices and course offerings where the topic of gender is addressed only in a few designated courses and then is entirely left out of the "regular" philosophy courses. To incorporate gender into the study of a particular philosophical tradition is oftentimes seen as a mere distraction from the "more important" philosophical concepts on which a true philosopher should instead focus. Even when textual misogyny is as clear

as day, those discrepancies are oftentimes brushed aside as irrelevant to our studies of all the great canons. Fortunately, there are exceptions, and scholars such as Hall and Ames normalized gender discourse in the “regular” study of Confucianism and helped pave the way for the rising record of comparative feminist studies on Confucianism.

In “Chinese Sexism” and in “Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics,” Hall and Ames not only confront the sexist aspects of Chinese culture head-on but also provide a culturally grounded conceptual paradigm for rethinking Western feminist critiques of Confucian misogyny⁴. The reason for revisiting Western feminist critiques of Chinese culture, of which Confucianism forms a prominent part, is that the feminist analysis of “third-world” women’s oppression is more often than not based on the assumed universality of its liberal individualistic framework. But liberal individualism is a culturally specific intellectual tradition rooted in a specific historical time. To blindly superimpose a Western conceptual framework onto a non-Western subject not only distorts the non-Western subject conceptually but, more importantly, hinders the feminist analysis in bringing about a liberatory movement in the transnational space.

For instance, in the conventional feminist analysis, the liberal dualistic paradigm of autonomy/dependency, subject/object, rationality/emotion, and so on underpins the problem of gender oppression. This is because it takes masculinity/male to be the embodiment of the ideal traits of humanity, whereas femininity/female is the defective being. This Western dualistic paradigm then is commonly used as the basis for understanding Chinese misogyny in terms of *yin/yang*. However, as Hall and Ames have argued, the *yin/yang* paradigm is correlative, not dualistic. Moreover, *yin/yang* and femininity/masculinity are not conceptual equivalents, since *yin/yang* is not primarily gender-based. In other words, gender is not the underlying principle of the correlative pair *yin/yang*. Instead, the *yin/yang* correlative pair is the basic organizational principle encompassing the human, natural, and cosmic realms. To see Chinese gender oppression through the lens of the Western dualistic paradigm of masculinity/femininity, autonomy/dependency, subject/object, rationality/emotion, and so on is to miss the mark. The process of genderization, after all, is a process of enculturation. Hall and Ames’s call for a culturally grounded conceptual framework to understand Chinese sexism is the first step forward to forming a viable solution to women’s oppression transnationally.

Despite sexism's pervasiveness throughout Chinese history, it is not an exclusive invention of Chinese culture, and despite its obvious textual misogyny, Confucianism is not incompatible with contemporary progressive projects, including feminism. Akin to the way in which contemporary scholars routinely appropriate Western canonical resources in an effort to solve contemporary issues, a much more charitable interpretation of Confucianism in its encounter with modernity can also be forged. Just like the canonical texts of Aristotle, Locke, or Kant, Confucian texts can also function as a great well of resources for all sorts of contemporary progressive projects. There is no a priori impediment to forming an inclusive transnational feminist theory that is Confucian and feminist at the same time. Feminism is not an exclusive prerogative of the West, and no one should be required to exit her own culture in order to be a feminist of some sort. Each culture, despite some of its questionable practices, must be granted a basic sense of respect as a starting point in the transnational feminist discourse.

Any enduring culture, as Charles Taylor eloquently argues, must have something valuable to offer despite its radical differences from our own. To discount that possibility is a show of blunt arrogance. As he writes precisely, "it would take supreme arrogance to discount this possibility a priori."⁵ Hence, in contrast to some who argue that multiculturalism is bad for women, I maintain not only that multiculturalism and feminism are compatible but also that non-Western traditions such as Confucianism can strengthen feminist theorizing.⁶ Feminism as a liberatory movement, in the most basic sense of the word, demands inclusivity. To limit feminist theorizing to Western scholarship is an unnecessary self-imposed impoverishment, and moreover, it misses the mark of its liberatory end. After all, the majority of women in the world are raised in non-Western traditions. Incorporating non-Western traditions such as Confucianism into feminist theorizing not only provides feminists with appropriate cultural frameworks to understand gender-based oppression transnationally but also provides conceptual alternatives for women of all colors to chart their own liberatory future. Specifically, a hybridized Confucian feminism merging care ethics with Confucianism is able to provide women viable alternatives to think through practical issues, such as filial obligations, inequality in spousal relationships, and political indifference to dependency care by utilizing characteristic Confucian concepts such as *ren* 仁, *xiao* 孝, *you* 友, *li* 禮, and *datong* 大同.

First of all, much like care ethics, caring relations underpin the core of Confucian ethics; other-regarding is characteristic of the highest ethical life for the Confucian. It is an ethical life that seeks outward expansion of its caring relations, incorporating ever more distant others. A hybridized care ethics with Confucian *ren* both cares for one's loved ones at home and seeks caring relations beyond the domestic, personal sphere. A Confucian-infused care ethics not only is able to retain the centrality of its caring character but also is able to meet the common liberal objection that care ethics is restricted to the domestic sphere. Confucianism is essentially a political theory that aims at effecting a *ren*-based humane governance by taking the intimate model of familial relationships as the starting point and then radiating outward to the community, state, and beyond. Hence, Confucian *ren* is able to extend care ethics' personal care to the social and political realms while retaining its caring centrality in an ethical life.

Confucian *ren* in its maximal form is expansive and political in nature, but its starting point is always personal and familial. *Xiao*, or our filial care for our parents, is the beginning of our moral education. And hence a hybridized care ethics will also take *xiao* as integral to our ethical life. Care ethics' emphasis on caring for the young is completed by the incorporation of Confucian *xiao*, which focuses on caring for the old. The centrality of *xiao* in Confucianism is undeniable: to be human is to be *ren*, and *ren* begins with *xiao*. In contrast, in the West the question of filial obligations is usually brushed aside as meriting no particular moral or public import, since familial obligations are seen as belonging to the personal (and conventionally women's) realm. The West's dichotomizing tendency in separating what is personal from what is public, or what is moral from what is familial, is unhelpful, since it provides no workable conceptual tools for us to navigate the actual contours of our everyday existence. Confucianism, on the other hand, understands our inevitable interdependency and thereby sees our filial obligations not as something merely personal (or particularly feminine) but instead as the moral foundation for a *ren*-based governance.

By grounding the moral foundation of the state in the family and the development of civic virtue in familial virtue, Confucianism does not fall into the same traps bedeviling the Western, liberal, contractual tradition where the personal is separate from the public and the ethical from the familial. This hybrid Confucian model also sidesteps the pitfalls facing care ethics where the criticism is centered on its apparent

inability to go beyond concrete personal caring relations, thereby reinforcing the limited, caring roles of women. Confucian *xiao* is not a personal care belonging only to the womanly sphere; rather, it is a moral basic for all in their search for a complete personhood of *ren*. Confucian *xiao*—an intergenerational labor of love that grooms each of us, as it were, from the ground up—is the perfect embodiment of the understanding that our inevitable interdependency must then lead us to our moral obligations to care for those near and far.

But some might argue that, by promoting a care-oriented ethics without at the same time addressing the problem of the unequal share of caring labor, care ethics is furthering the oppression of women, since now women must also care for the needy before they care for themselves⁷. And there is nothing more revealing of women's disproportionate caring labor than the roles of mother and wife. Marriage and motherhood have long been subjects of considerable discussion within the feminist communities, with some advocating for a “philosophy of evacuation,” or a complete abolition of the legal institution of marriage⁸. But instead of evading the problem by advocating for a retreat from the institution of marriage or motherhood, a hybrid concept of friendship infused with Greek *philia* and Confucian *you* 友 can help us reconceptualize modern spousal relationships and hence rehabilitate the institution of marriage. This might enable women to live a fully flourishing and ethically satisfying life, while sidestepping the pitfalls of liberalism's absolute equality. In rethinking the spousal relationship as a kind of friendship, the functionary and oppressive aspects of marriage are made incompatible with this friendship-based marital union. At the same time, by incorporating the marital relationship into friendship, the concept of friendship is made ever more perfect, since the best friendship is also the most intimate, where one shares all things in common with one's *philos* while walking the same path of moral goodness.

Spouses, instead of being defined functionally, should be best friends who lead one another to moral goodness, and the spousal relationship, in turn, is also the best friendship that is perpetual and complete in its form and content by building a truly shared life with all aspects of human capacities—*eros* and all. A feminist marriage should be a marriage of moral friendship and passionate love. This is a new conceptual paradigm of marriage that is made in a Confucian image for feminists. It is also a practical feminist paradigm that we mortals can strive for. To replace the

spousal relationship with this hybrid friendship model of Confucian *yǒu* and Greek *philia* will enable us to discard the gender-based roles in the family as well as the gender-based hierarchy, while at the same time upholding the integrity of the Confucian framework in meeting the feminist demand for gender equity, since friendship is one of the five Confucian social relations and is not gender-based. Moreover, this hybrid friendship model is able to avoid the pitfalls of the liberal concept of friendship based on symmetrical equality, which not only is unrealizable in our all-too-human life but also is at risk of degrading both friendship and marriage into a mere contractual transaction for the sake of absolute equality. Lastly, this hybrid friendship model is able to offer us a much more wholesome concept of human relationship, where family and strangers are not seen as two opposing poles but instead form a continuum of human intimacy.

Beyond the unequal caring labor in marriage, another perennial critique of care ethics is that it offers no structural changes that one can implement in the larger social/political realm. To stress the ethical importance of care does not by itself bring about a caring society. To achieve that, the care needs of the dependent must be addressed politically, and that in turn requires a political theory that addresses, first and foremost, the inevitability of dependency. This can be done by grounding the state's authority in its capacity to care for the most socially vulnerable instead of relegating the responsibility of care to the private/personal (and conventionally women's) realm. Second, we need a political theory that does not narrowly focus on defending the negative liberties of the self-reliant individual. This can be done by providing an enduring social mechanism, such as *li*, to render the self ever more porous and other-regarding so that the self becomes increasingly socially responsive as the self becomes increasingly ritually competent.

Li has a moderating and transformative effect on the self, since in performing *li*, the self must be in tune with others—the subject of one's reverence—and must be circumspect in each unique situation in an effort to harmonize the myriad things in the world. Unlike the Hobbesian man of nature, a Confucian self sees her existential interdependency, not as a lesser evil she tolerates out of the fear of mutual destruction, but as a strength. This strength is characteristic of human society in which the secured, meaningful, and flourishing life of each individual is made possible only in the midst of the continuous stream of human ecology and is sustained by ritualized mutual obligations that are measured, refined, and responsive to the

changing human condition intra and intergenerationally. Li is the ritual knot that binds us all to the past, present, and future. Hence, in Confucianism, dependency care is not seen as oppositional to one's civic competency or outside the realm of political discourse but instead forms an integral part of civil society.

Indeed, in order to foster a shared sense of dependency care, not just in the personal realm but also in the social and political realm, we will have to reconceptualize what constitutes the self, citizenry, and political authority. The liberal model of individual rights and limited government that has carried us this far is no longer conceptually adequate to carry us forward into this ever more interdependent and globalized world where emerging environmental/economic/social/political problems oftentimes crisscross multiple boundaries. The modern state must be more than an empty container for disparate individuals limited only by reactive, punitive laws. In facing the rise of national isolationism and xenophobia, not just in the United States but also across Europe, a shift in our conceptual paradigm of what constitutes a well-functioning state and a flourishing citizenry is sorely needed so that complex social/political problems, such as climate change, income inequality, criminal justice reform, and refugee crises, can be addressed and solved.

In contrast to the individually inclined Western political theory, where civic obligations and relations are contract-based and considered external to the core concerns of one's own self-interests, the Confucian utopia of *datong* epitomizes the ideal society in which all are cared for. This idyllic community represents the highest political aspiration for the Confucian, and its realization, in part, is premised on our willingness to go beyond the narrow concerns of our own selves or our immediate families to also care for others, especially the socially vulnerable, so that the old, the young, the sick, and the disabled are not just left out in the cold without proper care. An inclusive, caring political community is quintessentially, if not uniquely, Confucian. This provides a stark contrast when compared with the Western political theories that hinge largely on rational self-centric concerns. In other words, *datong* offers a genuine care-based state whose political legitimacy is derived, first and foremost, from its capacities to care for all, especially the socially vulnerable. As Mencius puts it, caring for the socially vulnerable is the political priority of a kingly state⁹. This Confucian model, as I see it, is the proper way for us to move forward into an ever more compassionate and inclusive future for humanity.

In the end, this inventive Confucian-feminist project is intended to provide women of all colors viable conceptual alternatives to think through their own lives in this increasingly globalized, hybridized world. To draw feminist inspirations solely from Western scholarship, making feminist theorizing synonymous with the West, is an unnecessary self-imposed impoverishment, and -more importantly, it is self-defeating for feminists, since the aim of feminist liberation is to foster a truly inclusive world in which all are accounted for. Just as feminist scholarship is striving to be counted as genuinely philosophical, non-Western traditions are striving to be noted as intellectual equals capable of informing all sorts of contemporary progressive projects, including feminism. Feminist liberation must be transnational in scope, and so must be its theorizing. An inclusive feminist future cannot be built based on a Western monopoly on theoretical space. A non-Western tradition, such as Confucianism, must be seen as capable of providing viable conceptual alternatives for achieving the feminist liberatory end. Hall and Ames's normalization of the topic of gender in the "regular" study of Confucianism opens up a constructive path for feminists like me to engage Confucianism philosophically and to envision a progressive and inclusive future for humanity that is feminist and Confucian at the same time. This forward projection of a feminist future is ever more needed in the age of Trumpism.

Notes

1. See Jill Filipovic, "What Does President Trump Mean for Feminists?," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016; Christine Emba, "Is Modern Feminism Out of Touch?," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2016; and Christina Hoff Sommers, "How to Make Feminism Great Again," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2016.
2. TH, 79–100; David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 75–96.
3. See Robin May Schott, *Discovering Feminist Philosophy: Knowledge, Ethics, Politics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 6–21.
4. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Chinese Sexism," in TH, 79–100; Hall and Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics."
5. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 256.
6. See Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7–24.
7. See Claudia Card, "Caring and Evil," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1990): 101–106; Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Vrinda Dalmiya,

“Caring Comparisons: Thoughts on Comparative Care Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2009): 192–209.

8. See Jeffner Allen, “Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women,” in *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 380–385; and Claudia Card, “Against Marriage and Motherhood,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (1996): 1–23.
9. See *Mencius* 1B5.