

Confucianism and Women in the Choson Dynasty

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The cultural heritage and traditional values of China have in general been derived from Confucianism—the foundation of East Asian culture and the most complex intellectual tradition in Chinese history. Confucianism has been a vital force, shaping the culture not only of China, but also of many of China's neighboring countries, particularly Korea. The mainstream of Korean tradition for over five hundred years, this system has influenced marriage, family, politics, education, and other areas of social relation.¹ While the Confucian model has served China and Korea remarkably well, it has also been criticized as patriarchal and misogynistic, its women sometimes regarded as victims of tradition. Although sexism and gender oppressive practices historically prevailed in pre-modern China and Korea, Confucius' teachings do not promote sexism. In fact, Confucianism contains much that can support an ethic of gender equality. This paper will explore how Confucianism evolved and influenced women in Korea and will claim that according to the Confucian ideal of *junzi* and its virtues of *ren* and *li*, sexism is incompatible with both the original theory and practice of Confucius. Moreover, we will look at how gender differences as delineated in Confucian society, established on the concepts of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai*, promote mutual cooperation and harmony between the two genders.

As the mainstream of Korean culture, Confucianism has been strongly present in Korean life since the Choson dynasty government (1392-1910) adopted it as a national religion. One autocratic form of Confucianism in Korea was its extremely negative impact on the status of Korean women. It imposed upon Choson women rigorous standards of feminine modesty and chastity.² The Confucian political culture emphasized the importance of family life for personal cultivation and strengthened the Korean family system with several cultural imperatives such as

ancestor worship, filial piety, and a patriarchal family structure. Since these social and cultural ideas legitimized men as authorities and privileged them as the sole bearers of the family names, more attention and priority were given to men of the family line while women's importance was reduced. Women's functional role in the family to produce a male heir became very significant, and the cultural preference for a boy later resulted in such sexist practices such as infanticide and concubinage.³ However, it is important to note that as the principle of benevolence, as articulated in the Confucian tradition, is to love others,⁴ Confucianism considers the lives of human beings superlatively important and does not sanction practices such as infanticide. We may account for the cultural preference for boys by keeping in mind that the Choson dynasty was a largely agricultural society. The importance of the physically strong man has been prevalent in almost every traditionally agricultural society. Married women in the Choson Dynasty were not in a position from which they could strongly voice their opinions and make important decisions, but they were not ignored or ill-treated. They were valued and, in good Confucian manner, treated as one of the family. When they grew older and became mistresses, their responsibilities broadened as they controlled food supplies and the succession of family properties. They even took part in deciding the successors of their families. Women and men were expected to perform different jobs that were well-suited to their differences, and within such an order of separation of work women could, within their own domain, exercise authority and control as men did.⁵

Confucianism as a social model does not tolerate the subordination of women; rather, it advocates virtuous relations between men and women through cooperation and harmonization. Human relationships constitute the central concern of Confucianism, and Confucius identified five relationships which he felt are fundamental to public stability: that between husband and wife, that between father and son, that between king and official, that between elder and younger

brother, and that between friends. While the first four describe linear power relations with the first member of each being the dominant half, Confucius intended these relationships to be created according to mutual need. The first member was expected to protect and nurture the second, while the second respected and served the first. Confucius' purpose in promoting such human relationships of difference is not to bring about confrontation, but to establish a rational order based on actual human relationships and pursue harmony. Therefore, Youruo, a disciple of Confucius, said that "achieving harmony is the chief function of ritual propriety."⁶ Confucius' intention was to promote harmonious relationships between women and men, not the (potentially destructive) submission of one to the other.

The Confucian ideal of *junzi* is also supportive of a mutual and balanced cooperation between men and women. The bedrock of the Confucian philosophy and one of the most prominent terms in the *Lunyu*, *juzji* translates roughly into English as "exemplary person"⁷ or "man of honor" For Confucius, and also for *Mencius* and *Xunzi*, *junzi* defines an ideal of a cultivated, noble, and exemplary ethical character developed through disciplined practice. If one aspires to become a *junzi*, one must nurture in oneself, by way of rigorous practice, values that are said to be commendable and excellent.⁸ Confucius makes frequent references of certain virtues such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (rites), *shu* (consideration of others), and *zhong* (loyalty) throughout the *Lunyu*; these are the characteristics of the *junzi* to be cultivated within oneself. Embodying such virtues is a heavy responsibility for any aspiring *junzi*, and only an exceptional person could demonstrate them. However, this does not inherently exclude the participation of women, who can embody moral excellence, kindness, and humaneness. None of these virtues is impossible for women to embrace and develop. Among them, *ren* is Confucius's *dao* and the ultimate virtue of Confucianism. Meaning "benevolence,"⁹ *ren* is fundamentally the love of

one's fellow humans or a loving concern for the well-being of humanity (Ames and Rosemont 160).¹⁰ Commitment to *ren* involves benevolence, which is a desire to be good to others as well as to respect the good of others. The character for *ren* (仁) is formed by the combination of one person (人) plus two (二); thus, the concept of *ren* stems from the relationship between more than two people.¹¹ Considering the Confucian conception of the social self and the form of the character *ren*, a *ren* person can be defined as someone who has developed these virtues through appropriate social engagements and has therefore increased the scope of his or her relations and influence. Such emphasis on the lifelong mission of self-cultivation and pursuing righteous social relations applies to both genders, and it encourages *ren* to be practiced by both genders toward each other.

According to Confucius, *li* is the way to achieve *ren*. *Li* is translated as “ritual,” “rites,” and/or “customs.” Pictorially representing sacrifices to the spirits at an altar, this character originally expressed sacrificial rites. However, this definition expanded to include all conduct, including table manners, proper conversations, and the fulfillment of ethical roles.¹² When asked for specifics, Confucius replied, “Do not look at anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not listen to anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not speak about anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety.”¹³ The suggestion is that one should always act with the attention and care characteristic of the performance of a sacred rite. Rather than being confined to a particular code of action, one should always be aware and attentive to act most appropriately according to the situation. Also, *li* is a crucial virtue in proper governance. “Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng*) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing*), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de*) and

keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li*) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.”¹⁴ In order to become a *junzi* in politics, one should rule in accordance with *li*; failure to do so will result in the lack of a sense of shame among the people, eventually leading to social disruption. If women were not expected or encouraged to study *li*, they would not be expected to respond in accordance with the injunctions of *li*. Also, if women did not have the potential power to realize the *junzi* ideal, the virtues of *ren* and *li*, the ideal cannot be expected to carry cosmopolitan force. Confucianism cannot afford to exclude women, who compose about half the population, from its philosophical and ideological program, as anyone—man or woman, Chinese or non-Chinese—has the potential to realize the ideal according to Confucian doctrines.

While it is clear that Confucianism does not discourage women from self-cultivation and nurturing within themselves this ideal, sexist cultural assumptions and practices persisted in both China and Korea. In the later trends in Confucianism, and most especially in neo-Confucianism, women were a repressed and suppressed group within Chinese and Korean society. They were expected to follow the Three Obediences, which relegated women to the successive authority of father, husband, and son. However, these Three Obediences were not introduced by Confucius. In fact, it was interpreters and scholars within the neo-Confucian movement under conservative social and political conditions who first articulated them. Confucius’s original ideas were erroneously interpreted by later scholars.¹⁵ Such biased ideology prevailed although they it was incompatible with the original formulations of Confucianism, which is understood in its historical narratives as a teaching of self-cultivation, care, and proper relation.¹⁶ Confucianism, in its original intent, cannot be saddled with all the blamed for this neo-Confucian politics, as

these cultural practices and assumptions were informed by influences from ideologies other than Confucianism.

Careful deliberation is required to answer the question as to why such practices and assumptions became so prevalent in China and Korea even though the original Confucian teachings significantly differ from them. The *Analects* contain no particular notion of sexism; however, the model of the Five Human Relationships and that of the Three Principles (三綱五倫) do mention gender *difference* (Jung).¹⁷ However, this difference is not framed in terms of authority or dominance; it pertained to the different jobs and responsibilities between men and women. In traditionally agricultural societies, men were responsible for the physical labor required for farming and women were responsible for household work, men being physically stronger than women. Since men were dominant in matters of production, they also assumed a dominant position in the family. It was after the 19th Century when these two aspects became interpreted as the gender difference in *authority*. Traditional Confucianism's logic was one of coexistence, not control or domination. Such a model was later understood by modern Western feminism as one of confrontation and struggle.

We may articulate this relationship between men and women through the dynamic of *yin* and *yang*. The main notion is that all things have opposite but complementary and mutually-defining aspects. Although *yin* and *yang* are not equivalent a sense of exhibiting the same natures or types of powers, they are in a mutual complementary cooperation and harmony, and it is this kind of harmony that is sought in the relations between men and women. Confucianism acknowledged the elemental difference between the two sexes, just as Chinese culture in general acknowledged the elemental difference of *yin* and *yang*. The *yin-yang* dynamic characterizes

everything in the world, and the contrast between pairs of opposite qualities such as heaven and earth, cold and hot, man and woman, death and birth, light and heavy, and bright and dark reflects the features of this cooperative interdependence. The contrast of *yin* and *yang* characteristics is not static; *yin* and *yang* undergo continuous cyclical interchange, alternating and following each other continuously in a perpetual and mutually-beneficial cycle.¹⁸ Confucianism saw that men and women have different attributes and abilities; thus, according to Confucius, they have different responsibilities. This belief is embodied in the sharing of responsibilities and roles, each gender operating within a sphere appropriate to its aptitudes and duties.

This distinction of the two genders as having different sets of responsibilities has long been illustrated through spatial imagery. *Nei* and *wai*, “inner” and “outer,” are the binary that defines the normative gender-based division of labor.¹⁹ The *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes) states that “a woman's proper place is the inside, a man's proper place the outside. The proper placing of men and women fulfills the grand principle of heaven and earth.” The *Li Ji* (Book of Rites) further shows that *nei* and *wai* are not only physical but also symbolic and deal with different (but complementary) spheres of influence and authority: “Men do not talk about [matters concerning] the inside, and women do not talk about [matters concerning] the outside.”²⁰ The social function and concentration of duty was different between men and women; men functioned in the public sector while women functioned in the private sector, mainly the domestic household. *Nei* and *wai* not only created a distinction of the genders’ roles, but also fostered a mutually cooperative relationship between men and women, granting each a realm of influence and control.

What emerges is a Confucianism that helped form the two genders' roles as played out within the cultures of China and Korea. As teachers, mothers, writers, and rulers in their own domain, women actively participated in the shaping of society. Confucius intended his teachings and doctrines to support an ethic of gender equality through the practice of *ren* and *li*. Confucianism acknowledged differences in men and women's natures and expressed these differences in the paradigms of *yin-yang* and *nei-wai*, and this was incorporated in the Choson Dynasty as well as in China, although other factors informed these cultural orders. Through harmonious support and cooperation between men and women, the *junzi* ideal may be successfully realized and the subordination of women eradicated.

¹ Moon, Ailee. *Korean American Women: from Tradition to Modern Feminism*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998. 26.

² Hyun, Jyoung Ja. "Sociocultural Change and Traditional Values: Confucian Values among Koreans and Korean Americans." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Volume 25, Issue 2; 2001. 206.

³ Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang. *Confucianism and Women: a Philosophical Interpretation*. SUNY Press, 2006. 122.

⁴ Ames, Roger, and Henry Rosemont. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. Ballantine Books, 1998. 160.

⁵ Jung, Ok-Ja. "Were Choson Women Oppressed?" *Seoul National University Discussion*. (in Korean): <<http://www.jontong.co.kr/00sum/12d.htm>>; 2000.

⁶ Li, Xiangjun. *An Explanation of the Confucian Idea of Difference*. Higher Education Press and Springer-Verlag, 2007. 491.

⁷ Ames, Roger, and Henry Rosemont. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. 60.

⁸ Ahn, Hosung. "*Junzi* as a Tragic Person: A Self Psychological Interpretation of the *Analects*." *Pastoral Psychology* 57; 2008. 101.

⁹ Ames, Roger, and Henry Rosemont. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 48.

¹² *Ibid.* 51.

¹³ *Ibid.* 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 76.

¹⁵ Wawrytko, Sandra. "Kongzi and Feminist: Confucian Self-Cultivation in a Contemporary Context." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27.2; 171-86. 2000. 174.

¹⁶ Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang. *Confucianism and Women: a Philosophical Interpretation*. 15.

¹⁷ Jung, Ok-Ja. "Were Choson Women Oppressed?"

¹⁸ Kim, Yung Sik. "Cosmos and Humanity in Traditional Chinese Thought." *NV 400, Beijing*. <<http://limiao.net/files/nv400-yskim-fulltalk200810.pdf>>; 2008. 8.

¹⁹ Rosenlee, Li-Hsiang. *Confucianism and Women: a Philosophical Interpretation*. 6.

²⁰ Ying, Hu. "Re-Configuring *Nei/Wai*: Writing the Woman Traveler in the Late Qing." *Late Imperial China* 18.1; 1997. 79.