The Sage and the Second Sex

Chenyang Li, Nanyang Technological University
The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender
Cahill, Suzanne
The Journal of Asian Studies; Nov 2001; 60, 4; ABI/INFORM Complete
pg. 1160

minutely worked out but highly contentious characterization of the nature of the salt gabelle and its role in late imperial history. Similarly, Kwan opts not to confront the characterization of his city’s economy and society offered in Gail Hershatter’s The Workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949 (Stanford University Press, 1986), though a dialogue between the two might have been revealing. Unfortunately, he does not seem to have been exposed to more recent American scholarship on Tianjin, such as that by Ruth Rogaski on early twentieth-century urban improvement campaigns and Brett Sheehan on the city’s bankers, though both would likely have aided him in formulating his own conclusions.

Instead, and regrettably, Kwan chooses as his major analytic device the recently fashionable debate on late Qing “civil society.” The debate itself seems to me stale and not very rigorous, and I found Kwan’s arguments in this area especially insipid. For example, he presents as one of his chief conclusions on this topic the statement: “Defining civil society as a confrontation between state and society . . . would miss the complexity of late imperial China when state and society expanded together, negotiating, confronting, yet learning to work with each other” (p. 121). This is most likely a fair characterization, but it is hardly news, or analytically very acute. His repeated claim that state-society relations in the early twentieth century were not “a zero-sum game” (stressed in the book’s “Epilogue”) seems to set up a straw-man argument that no scholar sensitive to the complexities of the historical process would advance.

This bit of over-reaching is particularly unfortunate because it distracts from what is otherwise a very well-researched and useful book.

WILLIAM T. ROWE
The John Hopkins University


This lively volume, as Patricia Ebrey notes in her foreword, contributes to the conversation between Confucianism and feminism and raises several important questions. These questions are crucial for both feminist studies and Chinese thought. Do men and women have different virtues? Are women fully human; can we participate in the Confucian project of self-cultivation? Recognizing that Confucianism and feminism are vast and diverse subjects, authors of the eleven essays collected here give us specific cases and issues to savor and contemplate.

Editor Chenyang Li’s “Introduction: Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?” asks whether Confucianism can survive the challenges of feminism. To remain viable, Confucianism must deal with both modern feminism and its own past oppression of women. But how? Like adherents of other traditional systems of thought, including the world’s major religions, Confucians must decide whether equality for women is compatible with their deepest values. Will equality strain the teachings of the founders to the breaking point? The papers included here present different viewpoints on this fundamental issue. Li believes that since women in Confucian China participated in social and moral functions, and since Confucianism and feminism have common grounds, they can come to terms with each other. Aside from his unconvincing attempt to excuse the statement attributed to Confucius in the Analects (17.25) that “women and petty people are hard to nourish,” by claiming that nüzi means “young girls” rather than “women,” he leads off with a fine discussion of the topics and papers.
The first chapter, "The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care," reprints a 1994 article by Chongyang Li that engendered much of the current debate. Li compares Confucianism and feminism, identifying several parallels between Confucian ethics and care-oriented feminist ethics. Both *jen* (true humanity) and care emphasize the tender side of human relations, the social context of the individual, personal responsibility, and graduated love. He argues that such commonalities show that Confucianism, despite its sexist past, can accommodate women's equality.

In chapter 2, entitled "Feminism as Radical Confucianism: Self and Tradition," Joel J. Kupperman asserts that the similarities between feminism and Confucianism reside more in the questions asked than in the answers given. He agrees with the classical Chinese philosophers that an effective system of ritual requires differentiated social roles, and that a sense of social roles and mastery of the associated rituals is important in good formation of the person. He believes that we can add the assumption of gender equity and still preserve what is valuable in Confucianism. Kupperman acknowledges the harm done to girls and women by the constraints of traditional Confucian women's roles, but warns against rapid social change that may reject good traditions along with bad. He concludes that feminist and Confucian ethics have common concerns, but differ because Confucians revere tradition while feminists want to change it. A Confucianism that included feminism would be radicalized in fundamental ways.

The fascinating third chapter, "Mengzi, Xunzi, and Modern Feminist Ethics," by Philip J. Ivanhoe, begins with the claim that the views of contemporary feminists and early Confucians can illuminate each other. The Warring States—period debate between Mengzi and Xunzi on the character of human nature both challenges and clarifies the current controversy among modern feminists over gendered virtue versus vocational virtue. The gendered virtue position makes "essentialist" claims, holding that men and women have different styles of ethical reasoning. The vocational virtue model assumes that people's lives and work shape their actions and beliefs, resulting in sets of virtues identified with men and women respectively. These virtues result from cultural conditioning and are not essentially gendered. Ivanhoe aligns Mengzi, who sees the roots of ethics in innate human tendencies, with the gendered virtue argument, while he associates Xunzi, who sees ethics as socially constructed, with vocational virtue. This comparison raises questions for historians and contemporary thinkers. If the school of Mengzi, sharing many values with feminist ethics, can tolerate unequal treatment of half of humanity, then the history of world sexism cannot be due to (western) male ethics prevailing. On the other hand, recent research has shown we are not born as blank slates upon which any gender role may be written by training. Ivanhoe concludes that observing the debates and parallels of Confucianism and feminism can help us recognize the resources we were born with and engage in the project of improving ourselves in ways that both might endorse.

David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames contributed the fourth chapter, wonderfully titled "Sexism with Chinese Characteristics." Hall and Ames argue that Chinese sexism is culturally specific and reflects an alternative structure western thinkers might use in interpreting gender differences. Western constructions of gender distinction tend to be dualistic, while the Chinese tend to be correlative. Neither brand of sexism allows women full humanity, but they justify themselves in different manners. One advantage for feminists in Chinese correlative thinking is that it allows the realized person to draw upon both male and female characteristics, becoming integrated, responsive, and whole. One danger is that this thinking may not allow for true equality, requiring hierarchy instead. Along the way, Hall and Ames criticize both
the wholesale lumping of everything old in China into "Confucianism," and the romantic notion that Daoism is somehow friendlier to women.

Chapter 5, "From Confucius through Ecofeminism to Partnership Ethics," by Ingrid Shafer, finds common ground and even a natural connection between Confucianism and ecofeminism: both view the world as organic, relational, and holistic rather than mechanical and dualistic. She emphasizes context and inclusion. Shafer believes that Confucianism, which she understands as a religion, can withstand exposing misogyny as a violation of what is right. She believes that thinking through the commonalities she identifies can help us understand the partnership between human and nonhuman communities on our planet, and form plans to stop the mistreatment of the earth that is the most urgent problem facing humanity today. If her article is sometimes naive (in its assumption, for example, that a Han Emperor writing a poem lamenting his dead mistress must have honored her as a person while she lived), it is also idealistic and hopeful.

The sixth chapter is Pauline Lee's articulate "Li Zhi and John Stuart Mill: A Confucian Feminist Critique of Liberal Feminism." Lee states that feminists have contested and reformulated ideas from within particular traditions in order to fashion tools for undermining the subjugation of women. She redresses the lack of scholarship on Confucian feminism by considering one distinctively Confucian feminist thinker, Li Zhi (1527–1602), and comparing his thought to that of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Both argue that segregating women creates incomplete persons who cannot fulfill themselves or contribute adequately to society. Both believe gender equality can be achieved by giving women the same educational and professional opportunities as men. But their views of separate spheres for men and women rest on different foundations. The domestic/public dichotomy assumed by Mill differs from the more flexible inside/outside contrast assumed by Li. For Li, women's deficiencies arise from a lack of opportunities for self-cultivation. For Mill, they come from inequalities before the law. Thus Li focuses on self-cultivation, while Mill concentrates on legal reform. Pauline Lee argues that both are essential in formulating strategies to address the historical injustices of patriarchy.

Chapter 7, "The View of Women in Early Confucianism" by Paul Rakita Goldin, asserts that fulminations against women in early Confucian texts are really directed against dissolute men. He finds inside/outside inconsistent and inadequate as philosophical categories. Goldin argues that Confucian thinkers insisted on the moral autonomy of all human beings regardless of sex, and that women have been allowed to participate meaningfully in the Confucian project. He claims there is a natural consensus that males and females are different. He does not pay enough attention to context or multiple causality, and his argument often sounds defensive, but he debunks the notion that Daoism celebrates women's equality, and notes that later periods were more sexist than earlier ones.

The eighth chapter is Sandra A. Wawrytko's "Prudery and Prurience: Historical Roots of the Confucian Conundrum Concerning Women, Sexuality, and Power." She provides a historical overview of Chinese sexual attitudes, and blames the sexism associated with Confucianism on a general cultural anthropophobia that increases after the Confucian synthesis of the Han dynasty.

Michael Nyland's stimulating essay, "Golden Spindles and Axes: Elite Women in the Achaemenid and Han Empires," makes up the ninth chapter. She investigates our sources for women's history and suggests that, with elementary caution, we can find out about elite women from the historical records of the two empires. Although the main written sources for Achaemenid Persia are not reliable, they agree with the
archaeological record in presenting elite women as resourceful agents, often reflecting the best of their culture’s values. In the case of Han dynasty China, Sinologists have taken prescriptions for women as descriptions of women, characterizing them as weak and submissive. While the Han histories do not always present truthful records of events, they provide good guides to the views of Han elite males toward women. They show women acting as agents in political as well as domestic life, and reveal a gap between rhetoric and reality. Besides, they are all we have. Nylan argues convincingly that our stereotypes of gender roles in ancient China do not come from ancient historiographers as much as from more recent sources, especially Neo-Confucians and May Fourth reformers, who assumed the existence of an unchanging culture and of rigid gender roles in antiquity. As well as being finely argued, this article with its many spicy tales of women in history is a pleasure to read.

Chapter 10 provides an excellent conclusion to the volume. In “Gendered Virtue Reconsidered: Notes from the Warring States and Han,” Lisa Raphals summarizes several issues discussed here, and makes her own powerful argument against gendered virtue. She asks: in classical Confucian arguments that everyone can cultivate virtue, can “everyone” be female? (Her answer is yes.) She looks at texts expressing views ascribed to Confucius, then at the writings of Warring States and Han thinkers, and finally considers Chinese evidence on belief in gendered virtue in the light of contemporary feminist claims for a distinct female ethic. She finds the views of Confucius unclear, while Warring States and Han texts suggest that both men and women are capable of self-cultivation and even of sagacity. She applies several critiques of gendered-virtue theory and concludes that an ethic of gendered virtue is equally problematic and dangerous in both Europe and China. Raphals’s enthusiasm is contagious, her thought rigorous, and her evidence convincing.

A timely and provocative collection of essays, The Sage and the Second Sex crosses the boundaries between Chinese thought and gender studies. It should increase the interaction between scholars in several fields of Asian history. Students of gender, ethics, feminism, philosophy, and Chinese history will enjoy it. Specialists and general readers alike will find much to ponder.

Several questions remain to be addressed more fully. What do we mean by feminism? Is Confucianism a religion, a philosophy, an ethical system, or a political ideology? Is it alive or relevant today? How is Confucianism separable from general Chinese tradition? Do we need to specify different Confucianisms for different periods of Chinese history to avoid the orientalist stereotype of “changeling China”? We must think further about defining both feminisms and Confucianisms, then describing how they are comparable. One way to find out if the sexism is fundamental to Confucian thought would be to study the question in other societies to which Confucianism traveled, such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

SUZANNE CAHILL
University of California, San Diego

In One’s Own Shadow: An Ethnographic Account of the Condition of Post-Reform Rural China. By XIN LIU. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. 261 pp. $45.00 (cloth); $15.95 (paper).

Xin Liu’s study is a powerful ethnography of a contemporary rural community in Shaanxi that has suffered from the changes of the past two decades. The residents