

Chinese Women and the Family: Discussion and Responses

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Following the delivery of their papers by the three panelists, the topic was opened to the floor. The discussion ranged back and forth over a number of issues. Cynthia Chapman, staff-member of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, who organized the event and chaired the discussion, grouped the main comments together by topic and edited them in the following paper. The format of presentation is intended to help the reader distinguish between comments from the floor and from the panel.

Universals, Ideals and Concrete Applications

Discussant: The speakers have presented something of a background to the issues. Theresa gave the ideal of the Catholic church; Eva gave the historical development in China and Josephine gave the Buddhist view. The problem today, however, is application. How can religion or philosophy help women today to face the present social, political and economic situation?

Josephine Leo: I appreciate your comment, because if we are not looking for an application, and are only concerned with theory, then we are not very good members of any tradition. Words like love, responsibility, commitment—which have been raised in the discussion—are very important qualities. The world is changing so fast; it's like having the rug pulled out from under our feet every day. If we ourselves do not have a commitment to life itself, then we are really at sea all the time.

Theresa Kung: I appreciate the question of concreteness. Everyone has her own choice when it comes to this act of loving God. We must first accept the role that God has given us, whatever that may be, and then we can contribute to the good of the society. We can do very little if we tackle all the problems of society. We, women, are oppressed because we are not free inside. If we were free inside, then we would not have so many questions about discrimination.

Discussant (to Miss Kung): I take issue with the way you present the

family. Sociology tells me that if you look at any institution you have to look at it in a concrete situation; but you present it as a universal form that exists in reality. Different cultures have different ideas of family; even within a culture there are many shapes of family. How can you convince people that there is something called “family” that exists in a universal form ordained by God?

Theresa Kung: First of all, I'm not going to convince you. It is a true and concrete experience that people are not happy in their hearts if they are not faithful to their spouses. The couples that are faithful have true love. I bring up this Christian experience because it is true.

Eva Man: We come together to decide how we are going to face the problems that we face as a Chinese woman in Hong Kong. All the traditional beliefs that human beings have clung to for millenia, are they applicable to this rapidly changing, capitalistic and consumeristic Hong Kong society? We've talked about love, righteousness, chastity, but when we talk about virtues, is there a universal meaning? If we think there is—according to the Commandments or texts—then we are in trouble; so most of us ask for an interpretation, a flexible interpretation. Confucius always talked about ren, or benevolence, in a very flexible way. Some people presented him with the following problem: there are ten people here, women, children, men. There are a hundred buckets of rocks, does that mean each person should carry ten? Confucius said, “no, it depends, if it is a woman carry five, if it is a child carry two and if it is a man carry ten.” That means that the principle needs to be applied flexibly according to the concrete situation. But we are then faced with the problem of relativism. Are ethics universal? Is there any universal moral principle? Or is everything relative? If everything is relative, it can be very dangerous. Neo-Confucians talk about one principle and many manifestations, but until now I have not been able to find any satisfactory answer to what that means. It is very idealistic to think that we know what righteousness, love and commitment mean in a concrete situation, so the burden is left to the individual. We are looking for some foundation, but we have lost it. I agree that commitment is important, but in our Confucian tradition, we are already overburdened with our commitment to society.

The Individual and the Group

Discussant: You are putting the family as a group above the individual. In our times we think that the individual should have a choice, and sometimes

the individual's needs are different from those of the group. I agree more with Dr. Leo, that the individual has his or her own divinity. If the needs of the group always supercede that of the individual, it becomes a problem.

Discussant: If the family is not the unit we are attached to, the community is. We cannot exist alone. The word commitment has not been raised here. We need commitment to one another in community.

Theresa Kung: In considering individual needs there is the problem of egoism. Do you think of yourself or the society? Does our choice harm society and only benefit us?

Eva Man: Actually, individualism is a word we could not find in our Chinese dictionary before there was contact with the West.

The Woman's Role

Theresa Kung: Let me give you an example: a woman comes home after work, her children come to her, but she is tired, so she just gives them some toys to play with. Did they really ask for material satisfaction from her? No, they will only be happy for a minute, and then they'll come back to her because they need her love, the love of a mother.

Discussant: What if the woman and her husband work full-time, but the woman comes home and has to be the cook, the wife, the mother, the caregiver, the homework checker, and the husband is sitting there peacefully enjoying all this attention. Women today are tired of wearing four and five hats. How can women be expected to balance all these responsibilities and still find the divinity within themselves? Maybe we need a rethinking of the family unit itself?

Theresa Kung: I sympathize with these women, but I know they often have maids to help. It is good for a woman to work outside the home, but she needs to remember the balance, not to forget that she is a mother.

Discussant: If we want to solve this problem, we should know our role as women. I'm a Muslim and from an Islamic viewpoint, the role of the woman is to provide a warm family life; the role of the man is to provide for the family. From an Islamic viewpoint, man and woman are equal, but they have different responsibilities in society.

Women and Religious Scriptures

Discussant: There are many critics of the three traditions who say that these

traditions have participated in the oppression of women. While you may be able to go back and find pure traditions, as Dr. Man has indicated, or paths of authenticity, or paths that lead to the actualization of the individual, those same texts socially have been used for the legitimation of the oppression of women. Many critics in the United States believe that the Christian discourse must be radically transformed because the historical transmission of the texts has been so perverted. The same thing can be said about the other two traditions. Does this mean that we need to abandon or revise these texts? Can they provide a foundation for revisionist use that makes them relevant in a contemporary age?

Josephine Leo: The texts are often used to oppress; but when we look at the social bodies that oppress, we find that only people without true wisdom oppress. We need to look for liberation of both men and women, because both are oppressed. Women and men need to look at the texts from the revisionist standpoint and see how they can develop true personalities from the perspective of the various religions. Although a lot of us call ourselves human beings, I find that humanity is a disappearing quality on earth. When you look at people, and you look at the way they deal with one another, you see the animalism, the distrust, the lack of harmony. We act like beasts. The founder of any religion would be grieved by the present situation. First, we must develop our personalities within very universal parameters like righteousness, integrity, honesty with ourselves, and faith, whether faith in God, our own divinity, or in humanity. I think each individual has to find that core in her own being before we can begin to lead a productive and active life.

Discussant: I'm trained in sociology and I'll try to respond with a sociologist's background. The first point is that some panel members mentioned that we should go back to the original text. I have some problems with this tactic because who cares today to read Confucius, Mencius, even the Bible? People are too busy. I would say, however, that the basic problem is not with the original text, but rather with the interpretation of that text. Who gets to do the interpretation. It's a problem of cultural hegemony. That means all the cultural edifices are in the hands of patriarchal society. The cultural interpretation is inbedded in a patriarchal, societal structure. We are not going to do revision without pulling down the whole structure, so it's also a problem of politics. The second point I want to respond to concerns revis-

ing the original text to liberate the message, but some sociologists and phenomenologists say that what forms the social structure is that which is taken for granted in every day life. It is not the original text that forms the social structure. That means if you want to change the values in society, you don't have to revise the original text. We must do some reflection on our every day life on the values that we take for granted. You can do the revision but you must have your eyes on our daily life as well.

Eva Man: Going back to the text and reinterpreting is a good thing to do, but it is only a starting point. But why does the pastor in a Hong Kong wedding always use the text that gives men and women an absolute role? Is it possible that these roles are only cultural? From a sociological perspective women need to read more, reflect more. This is a very important step. It gets people away from the sermons and gets people thinking for themselves about the spirit of Christianity or of Confucianism. It makes women question why their sons feel so happy and comfortable when they go home and their mothers serve them soup. Should the woman say to her son, "Hey, reflect, why do you feel so comfortable?" And should the woman ask herself "Are you really feeling comfortable or do you have any alternatives? If you were on the opposite side, would you feel more comfortable?"

Discussant: We've had a lot of comments on the original texts and how they're interpreted later on, but are these texts relevant today? What are the texts that have the biggest influence on the role of women in society today? It's certainly not the text of any of these religious and philosophical traditions. In my opinion, the media is the real text today which is determining the whole thinking process of the modern world.!

Discussant: I like the idea of reinterpreting the original text. As a mathematics teacher, I think of women's fear of doing mathematics because the text is so theoretical and the text is written by men. Men and women think differently. Throughout history almost ninety nine percent of the interpretation has been done by men and that is why the texts are so theoretical. Women interpret the text in a more down to earth way. We need more women to interpret the original texts. I believe that the original texts must be very inspiring, but the problem is almost all the interpreters are men.

God, Male or Female

Discussant: How come the Buddha never incarnated in female form?

Theresa stressed the role of woman in her discussion of Mary, but I think that in all religions I know of, God is male; and Jesus is certainly regarded as a male. It struck me that although we all know that there have been matriarchal societies in China, none of these has developed a strong religion with a female figure. The only goddesses I know of are in agricultural societies, goddesses of fertility. Why is it that woman has not served as an example or an idealistic figure that could be regarded as God?

Josephine Leo: The Buddha manifested in absolutely varied forms in the jataka; and there are at least one thousand mentioned from the Sangha and many of these were women—princesses. The Buddha points to the Buddha nature in all living beings, and so I think that Buddhism is one teaching that does not separate when it come to gender.

Discussant : It's true in the Jataka, but take the patriarchs of Ch'an Buddhism; you don't find female incarnations there. The Jataka are popularized religion.

Josephine Leo: That's religious Buddhism, the original. Later it entered China and various other countries and took on the characteristics of that culture. The Chinese culture was obviously very patriarchal.

Discussant: I would like to respond to the statement that God represents himself as a man most of the time. As a Muslim, I must say that Allah, whom we say is the Lord of the Universe, considers himself neither male nor female because it is he who created male and female. He told us in the Koran that he is neither a man nor a woman. Men and women have different roles, but Allah wants them to work together and create a good and righteous humanity.