

# Chinese women and the Family from the Confucian Perspective

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The social order of traditional China was that of an agrarian civilization governed by an imperial bureaucracy. Although Taoism, Buddhism and other schools of thought all influenced the development of the Confucian tradition, they never presented a fundamental challenge to the centrality of the Confucian family or the authoritative role it played in the moral life of China.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the role of women within Confucian society we need to first look at the Confucian idea of *li*. *Li* refers to the practice of rites, both religious and social. It is here that we can see the constraints exerted by the Confucian tradition on Chinese women and their role within the family.

*Li* or rites are the foundation of the feudal family. To understand both the traditional values shared by Chinese women and their changing roles within the family, we need to examine the rites and their relationship to Chinese society throughout history. In this paper I will give a brief treatment of two aspects of *li*; the philosophical aspect and the socio-political aspect.

Philosophically, *li* is related to *yi* or righteousness. Confucius says in the Analects (*Lun Yu*):

The gentleman has morality as his basic stuff and, by observing the rites, puts it into practice.

1. Stacey, J. *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983) pp. 17,59

Simply speaking, *li* is an expression of morality and the core concept in Confucian morality is order. The foundation of this order is *yi* or righteousness. This order, expressed in social rites, is not static. It can change in accordance with concrete situations. But it is these concrete situations and the institutions, reinforced by feudal society, which have led the rites to play such a central role in the development of many of the constraints placed upon Chinese women in history.

According to the Confucians, the practice of rituals can awaken one's moral consciousness. By following order and rituals, women are reminded of the humble role they play in society. But given that, in theory, everyone should play a humble role in society in order to promote social harmony, we are led to ask whether Confucius intended a greater degree of humility of women.

#### CONFUCIUS AND THE INFERIORITY OF THE CHINESE WOMAN

The first question to be asked is whether or not there is a general concept of the role of woman in Confucian teaching? The issue here is controversial when it comes to the original Confucian teachings. The most popular relevant quote in *Lun Yu* is the Confucius saying:

In one's household, it is the woman and the small man that are difficult to deal with (The Analects, XVII:25)

The question is whether woman here refers to women in general or to a particular type of woman. The later neo-Confucians have argued that since women are given a more equal status to men elsewhere in the *Lun Yu*, and that here "woman" is coupled with "small man" (*hxiao ren*)—which is a specialized term—that the reference to women in this chapter is to a particular group of court ladies who like to socialize with those small men at the court. This particular group of women are insolent and like to complain; therefore, they are difficult to deal with. As one prominent neo-Confucian thinker puts it: "We should not regard this as a general saying on woman by Confucius."<sup>2</sup>

Nor, they say, should Confucius be held responsible for Chinese woman's foot-binding and her being deprived of education in later Chinese history, as neither are mentioned or implied anywhere in the writings or sayings attributed to him. On the contrary, Confucius says all people should be educated.

2. Ts'ai Jen-hou, *Ju-chia hsi-hsiang-ti hsien-tai-hua* (The Modern Meaning of Confucian Thought), Taipei: Wen-tsin Publishing House, 1987.

The answer to the question may be related more to the development of the social structure of the country; the changes and controls needed to promote the stability of the great empire.

#### FROM MATRIARCHAL TO PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Records and researches on the differences between the Yangshao and Lungshan cultures showed that when China was still a matriarchal society, women played what might be considered a more important role in society. They managed knitting, handicraft and even trading while the men dealt with hunting. Later, women invented farming and thus are the source of the single greatest change in the economic structure of China. As farming changed and other forms of enterprise such as metal work developed, there was a shift in the division of labour based solely upon the amount of physical energy demanded. For this reason, men began to play a more significant role. Socially, this brought about the shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal form of society.<sup>3</sup>

The patriarchal head, usually the oldest male of the family, was its production chief, in charge of economic activities and the supervision of work. It must be kept in mind that in traditional China, economic activity was also considered as a moral and political activity.<sup>4</sup> The patriarchs goal was to maintain an unbroken lineage which would reside together on the ancestral property for all time. This emphasis on lineal continuity increased the importance of producing male heirs, which in turn increased the subordination of women to men. A man exclusively owned his own woman and children. As the lineal blood line was the main concern of the system, a man could marry many women and concubinage was officially adopted. The woman, of course, had to loyal to her man.

The pattern of patriarchal familial foundations found in China is much the same as is found in other agrarian civilizations. Confucianists expressly took the well ordered family as the basic unit of socio-political order and as a microcosm of the state and cosmos as well.<sup>5</sup> The order of the family was the key to the order of the state—both were based on the practice of filial piety.

3. Op. cit Stacey, p. 23

4. Ibid., p. 27

5. Ibid., p. 30

We can also trace the tradition of social constraints on women within the feudal society back to the Confucian teaching concerning the five cardinal relations: the ruler and the minister; father and son; husband and wife; elder and younger brothers; friend and friend. Special attention should be paid to the first three as they are related to the role of woman.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE NORMS FOR WOMEN.

In the writing of perhaps the most important Confucian writer other than Confucius himself, Mencius, we find an emphasis placed on the difference between husband and wife, man and woman. As Mencius said (IVA:17):

Is it prescribed by the rites that in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other?

When a girl marries, her mother gives her advise and accompanies her to the door with these cautionary words: when you go to your new home you must be respectable and circumspect. Do not disobey your husband. It is the way of a wife or concubine to consider obedience and docility the norm.

Such saying as these became the traditional justification for the constraints placed on Chinese women. However, the important paragraph that follows deserves special attention when Mencius was asked:

When one's sister-in-law is drowning, does one stretch out a hand to help her?

Mencius' answer is:

Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute... (IVA:17)

This shows the sense of righteousness both Confucius and Mencius stressed as transcending the rites governing relations between man and woman. Below we shall see how this original spirit was distorted in later ritual development.

In the warring states period, legalist thinker and politician, Han-fei stressed the three primary relations: the minister serving the ruler, the son serving the father, and the wife serving the husband.

In the Han Dynasty, Tung Chung-shu based the three primary human relation on cosmological and metaphysical speculation. This greatly strengthened the necessity of moral constraints on woman. Tung was heavily influenced by Taoist cosmology. He said:

Husband in *yang*, wife is *yin*. Yin is not independent. It cannot share the achievements. It is just the deputy.

In traditional China, it was also the case that women were not allowed to own property. This rule, together with other detailed rituals concerning the family relations, are recorded in *Li-Chi*, the book of rites, which was completed in the Western Han period. In the Li-Chi, the father and son relationship in the primary one. The son has to give up his wife if the parents don't like her. The moral requirements and rules of behaviour required of women were recorded in detail in the Li-Chi. The popular themes are the three obediences and the four virtues.

Woman is the obedient; to her father in her youth, to her husband in her marriage, to her son in her widowhood.

Thus it is historically true that in the past, the Chinese woman's social stature and economic survival depended upon each of these men all through her life. Li-Chi also stated the four virtues of woman. Three months before a woman got married, she was taught these four virtues: Woman morals, woman talk, woman appearance and woman work.

Women were also excluded from public life and education. One of the Confucians of the later Han dynasty, Yang Chun believed:

If women are entrusted with tasks involving contact with the outside, they will cause disorder and confusion in the empire,... a clever woman can overthrow a state.

Women those days lived only to serve her parents-in-law and her husband. Here are two classic examples from the Han dynasty. A woman named Man Kwong just got married. Her husband did not talk with her for seven days immediately after the marriage. She knelt in front of him until she learned that her husband did not like the fine way she dressed. She changed back to the old ragged way she use to be and whenever she served a meal to her husband, she dared not look at him, but only at the tray which was held parallel to her eyebrows. The other classic example is Mdm. Pond who ran seven miles every day to get her mother-in-law fresh river water as she hated to drink well water. One day she was late due to a thunder storm

and her mother-in-law got mad with her and drove her out. Mdm. Pond stayed in the neighborhood. She knitted for a living and continued to supply her mother-in-law with good food. She was praised by the village people and her husband got an official position because of her virtue.

After Han, in a period characterized by great disorder and internal wars called the six dynasty period, the intellectuals turned to Taoist thought and purposely abandoned the system of rites as they lost faith in Confucianism. Man and woman communicated with each other in a more liberated way. A wife was no longer required by rite to submit to her husband when he made unrighteous demands.

In the Tang dynasty, the whole China was united. The ritual system of the family, as the basic unit of order, was generalized and standardized so as to promote the further stability of the whole country. The standardization of family rites, including those related to women, were spread through popular readings like *The Book of Woman's Piety* and *Woman's Analects* etc. These books were easy to read and remember. An example is a chapter of the *Woman's Analects* titled, "Serving Parents" where it says:

A woman has to respect her parents; has to send them regards every day; has to prepare fire for them in winter; has to cool them with a fan in summer; serve meals when they are hungry; serve soup when they are thirsty. Women should not panic when being scolded, but listen and reflect and correct themselves.

Later, the moral content in *Li Chi* was appropriated and elaborated according to immediate social needs by intellectuals like historian, Zema Kwong, and philosopher, Chu Hsi. In the book *Family Norms* written by Zema Kwong, it says that: in the relations of father to son and husband to wife, the latter are like laymen; they are ruled. In the book *Family Rites* by Chu Hsi, women were requested to read popular books like *Biographies of Chinese Women* which contained models of good and bad female conduct and *Women's Commandments* which provided detailed lists of what a proper woman's daily work should be, starting at the first crow of the rooster until the end of the day. Chu Hsi emphasized the chastity of widows; his famous line being:

It is alright for a woman to die in hunger but not alright to lose chastity.

From Sung to early Ching dynasty, widow chastity was further promoted, and the highest feminine virtue in Confucianism is wifely fidelity. A square column would be built with the chaste woman's name and story

carved on it after she died. Here is a classic example in the *Biographies of Woman, Ching History* :

The fiancé of Chun Fu-man died when she was eighteen. Her parents wanted to marry her to somebody else. When she learned that the go-between was coming to her place, she cut off her left ear. Three days later, she cut off her right ear, went to her fiancé's family to complete the funeral rites. Finally, she committed suicide.

Later institutionalizations of Confucian moral teaching developed historically in a direction opposite to the original Confucian spirit, aimed as it was towards the actualization of human freedom and value through the autonomous, moral will. These rites and institutions are better viewed as expressions of feudal politics and the accompanying patriarchal systems. From the view of the contemporary critical theorists, they were adopted by the women unconsciously and disguised as moral imperatives founded in the Confucian metaphysical and cosmological beliefs.

#### CHINESE WOMAN IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING SOCIETY

Nowadays, though the feudal system and its ideology are long since departed, Chinese women are still influenced by some of the traditional concepts of the Confucian woman, albeit to a lesser degree. We are expected to be submissive to the male members of the family and to take the roles of mother and wife as the first priority. However, living in a capitalistic and commercial city where we are educated and trained to compete with other men and women to achieve a better living, we are also expected to be self-sufficient, independent and to contribute to society. Illiteracy and subordination are no longer virtues for women. The majority of Chinese women in Hong Kong are leading a life with double standards and are forced into what amounts to split personalities or double lives.

In the past, Chinese women had no choices. They were not trained to be independent. They could not inherit property. Their names were not even recorded in their fathers genealogy.<sup>6</sup> In the course of at least two thousand years of subjugation, traditional Chinese women probably lacked the ability, motivation or opportunity to liberate themselves from submission, docility and self-denigration. Compared with women in traditional Chinese societies, we women of today have more opportunities and are

6. Ibid., p. 38

more self-aware; and yet, because of this, we are also more frustrated. We are constantly faced with conflicting roles and images of what a woman as a good person should be.

When a student asked Confucius the meaning of benevolence, his answer is simply: "If you feel good, do it." It seems unlikely that a contemporary Hong Kong Chinese woman, caught as she is between the weight of Confucian tradition and the liberating call of modern culture can grasp the meaning of feeling "good" in such a simple and direct way.