

Chapter 7

Towards a Proper Relation Between Men and Women: Beyond Masculinism and Feminism

Tangjia Wang

7.1 Introduction

As an early 20th-century Confucian scholar has commented, “the womanhood in a nation is the flower of the civilization, of the state of civilization in that nation” (Ku 1922, p. 74). The status and treatment enjoyed by women in a civilization are associated not only with its forms of production, ways of life, political and economic affairs, and family structure, but also with the concept of self-consciousness that has been taken for granted in that civilization. Based on a particular concept of feminine nature, a civilization’s feminine ideals provide orientation and guidance for how women should be treated by men and women’s role towards men. Confucianism, as a long-standing institution, holds a specific understanding of feminine nature quite different from that of modern Western feminism. Many people seem to think that the important distinction between Confucianism and feminism regarding women lies within Confucianism’s emphasis on the differences between women and men, whereas feminism stresses the sameness of women and men. Accordingly, on the surface, these two conceptions of femininity represent two extremes. The Confucian perspective regards the differences between men and women as justified by its metaphysical account and is understood as normative in traditional Chinese hierarchical society. The feminist perspective, on the other hand, is rooted in a liberal conception of equality between women and men, which has become popular in modern Western society. This contrast gives rise to a few relevant questions that should be taken seriously. Is the Confucian view a form of masculinism that holds men superior to women? What is the authentic Confucian understanding of women and its corresponding understanding of the proper relationship between man and woman? What can Confucianism learn from modern Western feminism? And what can feminism learn from the

T. Wang (✉)

School of Philosophy, Fudan University, Shanghai 200433, China
e-mail: tjwang@fudan.edu.cn

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cardinal spirit of Confucianism? Can we successfully overcome the one-sidedness of both masculinism and feminism?

In this chapter I shall use the scholarship of Jiang Qing to argue that the true Confucian view of woman is a form of neither masculinism nor modern feminism. Instead, as Jiang argues, Confucians see both similarities and differences between male and female: they are similar because they are both the most honorable beings under Heaven, and they are different due to the manifestations of their numerous distinct biological, psychological, social, and metaphysical features. In other words, the complete picture of woman and man provided by Confucianism shows a similarity in their differences as well as differences in their similarity. Failing to acknowledge either of them results in an improper one-sidedness. Regardless of whether one is confined to the extreme of masculinism or feminism, it will inevitably be harmful to both men and women. Confucians have recognized a basic truth: gender is the product of natural differentiations, and gender differences are inherent in natural selection. If the differences between male and female were to disappear, it would mark the end of the human world. In Confucian metaphysics, *yin* and *yang* constitute the basic elements of the universe and they must cooperate and be combined in order to make up an orderly world. Hence, man (as dominantly yang) and woman (as dominantly yin) must be united to complement each other in order to realize human reproduction, prosperity, and happiness (see Fan 2010, pp. 260–264).

This does not mean that we should adopt a feminism that requires absolute equality in rights and responsibilities between men and women. Given the metaphysical, biological, and psychological differences between men and women, their natural differences should not be neglected. Neither should their differences in familial and social roles, determined by differences in sex, be ignored in distributing their respective rights and responsibilities. Confucianism finds it natural and proper to have men bear more responsibilities in familial, social, military, and political issues generally. Requiring absolutely equal rights and responsibilities between men and women would not only endanger the order of society and the harmony between men and women, but it would also destroy their happiness. Such equality, attained by neglecting the differences in sex and gender roles is not a real equality, but a great inequality. It is an illusion and a false consciousness, which prevents individuals from pursuing the meaning and value of life that they deserve as women or men.

This is not a defense of gender discrimination. Gender discrimination tends to be a kind of masculinism, which regards man as superior to woman. On the contrary, Confucians should first and foremost take seriously the feminist call for the elimination of gender discrimination and sympathetically understand feminism's strong disapproval of masculinism. However, a moral protest against arbitrary masculinism with the hope of developing a new egalitarian ideology is unwise and harmful to all Confucians: both men and women, as well as families, society, and future generations. From the Confucian perspective, every human being should be loved and respected, regardless of whether one is a

woman or a man. However, this does not lead to the extreme view that women and men must possess identical rights and responsibilities within the family, society, and politics.

7.2 A Distorted Confucian Perspective on Women

Some believe Confucianism holds that women are inferior to men. For them, this Confucian view is responsible for the comparatively low status of women in traditional China. Indeed, Confucianism has established a family-centered and inner-balancing mechanism, which is not powerful enough to change the man-dominated hierarchy, but it nonetheless seeks to compensate for the losses of women in their familial and social lives. This inner-balancing mechanism is a systematic arrangement of individual responsibilities in accordance with a variety of roles everyone (women included) undertakes in familial activities. It includes general principles, rules, and rituals that a woman should observe in her horizontal relation to her husband as well as in her multiple vertical relations, such as those with her son, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, and so on. In this way, we can give a relatively clear description of the hierarchy and gender structure of traditional China and effectively explain the inner logic of the Confucian conception of women. Importantly, we should note that the way some Confucians treat women and how Confucianism as a coherent theoretical doctrine and practical wisdom expresses its view of woman are two different things, as is the case in other cultures. We should not rely on the particular comments or conduct of an individual Confucian scholar as a means for depicting the whole Confucian picture of women.

It is well known that Confucius held the precious idea that all humans should have an opportunity for education. It is also well known that he talks very little about women in the *Analects*. However, there is one, and only one, place in the *Analects* where he speaks of women directly, and it appears to express a despising attitude toward women: “only women and small men are difficult to deal with. If you let them get too close, they become insolent. If you keep them at a distance, they complain” (*Analects* 17:25; see Lau 1979, p. 148). The specific context of these words is unknown to us. It remains controversial whether the Chinese word “*nuzi*” was used to refer to “woman” in his time, as it is generally understood today. Some research suggests that it might only mean “maid”, not “woman” generally (see Li 2000). In any case, given the significant influence of the *Analects* in the Confucian tradition, this saying by Confucius might have exerted a significant impact on the formation of the masculinist view that “man is superior to woman” in traditional Chinese society. Moreover, many people would find the answers of the Song Dynasty neo-Confucian, Cheng Yi, offensive to women. When a student asked whether a widow could remarry, Cheng replied, “Starving to death is only a small affair, while losing chastity is a big affair.” When another student asked, “What if she has a child and leads a poor

life?” Cheng replied: “They said this only because they are afraid of starving. Still, starving to death is only a small affair, while losing chastity is a big affair” (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 301). Obviously, Cheng held that if a woman remarried, she would lose her chastity, while a man could remarry and have no problems with chastity. Of course, how much influence Cheng Yi’s comments have exerted over the Chinese reality is a complicated issue. As some scholars have commented, “no matter how powerful Cheng’s personal opinion was, it could not form the subsequent Chinese custom and rites – indeed, widows’ remarriages took place everywhere during the Song Dynasty” (Wu, Xu, and Zhao 2002, p. 102). However, it cannot be denied that when Song neo-Confucianism was regarded as orthodox in subsequent Chinese dynasties, Cheng Yi’s opinion of a widow’s remarriage was, too. If one goes to the Huizhou city of Anhui province, one can view the fully intact “chastity plates” of widows who decided not to remarry and can listen to the stories behind them filled with many tears and bloodshed. It is true that those widows who decided not to remarry did so in order to take good care of their children and parents-in-law, but how can it be true that whenever a widow remarries she loses her chastity?

This is a distorted Confucian perspective on women: women are inferior to men, and women should be subordinate to men. What we need is to gain an undistorted, complete Confucian view of women. However, modern Chinese history shows that this cannot be achieved by turning to a feminist view, which stresses absolutely equal rights and responsibilities between men and women. As is well known, Confucianism has been demonized in modern China since the May Fourth Movement of 1919. In 1949, Mao announced that his new China would be a brand-new socialist country achieved through the destruction of Confucian values. Mao established a strong egalitarian slogan: “women hold half the sky,” which emphasized the equal rights and responsibilities of women and men. More than half a century has passed, and Mao’s egalitarian society is far from being realized.

Obviously, in all changes of the countryside in new society we can notice a kind of asymmetry: new social organizations and structures have kept being developed, while professional and class divisions have experienced tardy changes. While the economic structure in the countryside is undergoing dramatic changes, the gender structure remains stable in essence, in spite of many seeming changes. We might as well state that in the process of economic transformation, no matter how great the industrialization develops, the gender structure in which man dominates over woman has not changed dramatically (Yu 2000, p. 3).

Equal rights and responsibilities may not benefit woman. Traditionally, Chinese women have worked at home, while their husbands have worked outside of the home. Mao’s egalitarian ideology pushed women to work outside of the home – “equal” to men – but they could not help but take care of their housework as well after they get home. This means that while traditionally women have only worked at home, they now have to work both inside and outside of the home, doing twice the amount of work. This is why many women

complain that they are exhausted by the new “equal” system (Jiang 2008, pp. 174–175). While women were once disadvantaged under the distorted Confucian view, they are now not benefitting from the modern Chinese egalitarian ideology.

7.3 A Complete Confucian Perspective on Women

In his book entitled *Political Confucianism* (2003), Jiang includes a chapter on the Confucian conception of marriage. A complete Confucian view of women as well as the man-woman relationship can be developed from the Confucian conception of marriage in conjunction with the Confucian understanding of human nature. This complete view differs from the distorted view previously discussed in the first section. Generally, Confucianism views the woman as a eudemon within the family, taking care of each family member in a loving and gentle manner. For the Chinese people, if women are no longer regarded in this way, civilized Confucian society will be lost. Accordingly, although one can see the character of women from various perspectives, Confucianism holds that one cannot understand women properly without considering the nature of the family as well as the woman’s status within it.

Why should we first establish the Confucian conception of women from the perspective of the family? Because Confucianism has assigned a uniquely important place to the family in human life. As the Confucian classic, *The Great Learning*, points out, “the ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their persons” (Chan 1963, p. 86). The Confucian emphasis on the importance of the family embodies the Confucian philosophy of promoting the virtue of the people, reflects the natural human feeling towards the unity of the family and the state, and exerts a proper impact on the ways in which human society is governed through proper policy. It has also established the aim of life that individuals should strive for – namely, virtue cultivation, through which one can nurture the emotion of love from one’s family and extend it to the state and eventually the whole world. As Ku Hungming remarks,

To us Chinese, a man who does not marry, who has no family, no home, which he has to defend, cannot be patriotic; he calls himself a patriot, we Chinese call him a brigand patriot. In fact, in order to have a true conception of a state or civil order, one must first have a true conception of a family. And of a family life, one must first of all have a true conception of marriage (Ku 1922, p. 345).

It is clear to Confucians that the family is the epitome of a country, which is regarded as a magnified family. The family is a fundamental economic unit and is the best school for teaching one how to be a good person. Therefore, among

the Five Relations that Confucianism takes as the cardinal human relations (the relation between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, brother and brother, and friend and friend), three of them are familial relations. Two of these relations, the relations between husband and wife and between parent and child, constitute two of the Three Bonds (*sangang*) in Dong Zhongshu's *Luxuriant Dewes in Spring and Autumn* and Ban Gu's *Bai Hu Tong De* in the Han dynasty (2nd century BCE).

Moreover, for the Chinese public, the family is the center of their lives. It is the locus of their emotions and is inseparable from their purpose in life. In traditional Chinese agricultural society, the family life is one in which "man works in the field and woman knits at home." Indeed, the Chinese characters for woman (妇) and man (男) vividly illustrate the idea that "man is for the sword and woman for the hearth." In fact, this idea is clearly recorded in the Confucian classic, the *Book of Change*, (Zhou 1991, p. 129). From the Confucian view, this functional difference between man and woman is not only due to the physical differences between them, but is also due to woman's sacred nature and the role she plays in human reproduction, child-bearing, and child raising within the family-centered daily lives of human beings. In addition, Confucians generally believe the more children, the more happiness. As a result, a woman may have very limited time and energy to participate in activities outside of the home. Moreover, humans have always lived with the condition of resource scarcity. This is especially true in an agricultural society in which the simple social division of labor and limited land resources confine opportunities to only a few participants. The Confucian female ideal is essentially family-centered: a woman should become a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. For a woman, bearing and raising children is more important than other things in the world. A woman's responsibility for her family is taken to be a sacred responsibility within Confucianism because it is related to one's ancestors and the Mandate of Heaven. This kind of sacredness makes the family the center of love and the woman the Mistress of the Kitchen ("主中馈") – an expression which carries all positive and desirable connotations for the Confucian Chinese. In short, there are good Confucian reasons to define a woman's function as family-centered.

Confucianism specifies a few key ideas about the life of a woman. First, it is morally mistaken for a woman to remain single throughout her lifetime. It is taken for granted by Confucians that both men and women should be married upon reaching adulthood. Neither men nor women should have the "freedom" to decide not to get married. If being single were to be regarded as a value or even a social ideal, Confucians would think it an abnormal ideal existing in an abnormal society. This is not say that there should not be any exception. But exceptional cases should not be seen as the norm or as a "fashionable" social development. For Confucians, the normal life of a woman includes getting married, having children, raising children, and loving and being loved by her close family members.

Second, a woman must be loved and respected by her children within the family. This idea is implied and emphasized by the Confucian notion of *xiao* (filial piety). In the *Book of Filial Piety*, it states that “filial piety is the root of morality” (Li 1999, p. 61). Normally, a woman plays various roles in her families depending on the different stages of her life: she should be filial to her parents and parents-in-law, and she should likewise be loved and respected by her children and children-in-law. In addition, a woman is cared for and protected by her maiden family in many regards. If she is not treated well by her husband or her mother-in-law after marriage, her maiden family members should fight for her and get her her proper due. If her new family leaves her alone, the younger generations of her maiden family should also support her financially. In her new family, she should integrate herself into it by playing the various roles of wife, daughter-in-law, mother, aunt, sister-in-law, etc. As time goes by, she will become a grandmother. As a mother and grandmother, she will receive love and respect from her children and grandchildren, and will hold considerable authority over them. Since Confucian family values have filial piety at their core, as a child, everyone, no matter what else one is, must be filial to one’s parents. This is to say that even if one is an emperor, one must also love and respect one’s mother. This is why some women have held genuine political power in Chinese history due to their “filial” emperor sons. In short, Zhu Xi presents the character of filial conduct this way:

A filial son who deeply loves his parents is certainly very kind in serving them. Such a kind person certainly has a pleasant expression on his face. With such a pleasant expression on his face, he certainly has a soft and courteous style. So if someone serves his parents with a rude expression on his face, he should not be considered as filial. To be filial is more than merely providing one’s parents with food, clothes and services (Zhu Xi 1983, p. 56).

Besides, women generally have a longer life span than men and, consequently, become the single authority over their children and grandchildren in the family once their husbands have died. Unfilial children are considered blameworthy and lose their reputation as normal human beings in their hometowns. Indeed, there are many Chinese stories about filial piety. It is no surprise that some high officials blatantly claim that the reason they became high officials was to please their mothers.

Third, women should undertake their proper responsibilities. From the Confucian view, whether inside of the family or in social activities, husband and wife should not argue or fight with each other, but they should support, help, and care about each other. All men and women should fulfill their respective responsibilities. This moral requirement, which is two-sided rather than one-sided for women, takes into account not only the natural and functional differences between men and women but also balances and complements the structure of both sexes. An influential Confucian scholar, Han Ying, in the 2nd century BCE, summarized the relevant Confucian ideal in this way:

In peaceful times, the people are engaged in their labor and services without overtime, man and woman get married at the time they become adults, and filial sons always conduct their filial acts towards their parents. Outside the family you can see no man around without doing anything; inside the family you can find no woman discontented and unhappy. There is no un-benevolent parent above or un-filial child below. Parent and child complete each other, and husband and wife protect each other (Xu 1980, p. 102).

Han Ying's remarks are reasonable such that modern-day feminists should find them agreeable. It accords with the moral ideal of "man for the sword, woman for the hearth" in traditional Chinese society. It embodies the basic Confucian moral requirement that all persons, both men and women, should be loved and respected and should also cultivate virtue and bear their respective responsibilities. The cardinal spirit of Confucianism is that everyone should play one's essential role and function: rulers should act like rulers, subjects like subjects, fathers like fathers, sons like sons, husbands like husbands, and wives like wives.

Han Dynasty Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu has been violently criticized for his proposal to proscribe all non-Confucian schools of thought while espousing Confucianism as China's orthodoxy ideology. His view of the Three Bonds has often been criticized as supporting the depreciation and oppression of women (I will turn to this issue later). Yet, he was a great Confucian political thinker with a benevolent heart. He contributed, from the Confucian perspective, a deep analysis of the Qin Dynasty's downfall after its 15-year reign and fought against the competition between officials and the people for benefits and profits. He also held that all natural resources, such as salt and iron, should belong to the people, not to the government. He argued that taxes should be reduced to strengthen the ability of the people to help themselves. He was courageous enough to argue that the slave-servant system as well as the Emperor's absolute executive power should be abolished. Indeed, his Confucian ideal was to enable rich men to show their nobleness, but not to be arrogant, and to ensure poor men the provision of food and clothing so they would not have to worry about their living. He wanted to realize a prosperous society in which there were peaceful and harmonious human relations (Dong 1989, p. 47). This is to say that there have been good reasons for history to choose Confucianism as its dominant ideology, which has been the case for over 2000 years in addition to Dong's proposal. Many schools of thought have competed with Confucianism throughout Chinese history. However, that Confucianism was distinguished and developed into an official ideology during the Han Dynasty was not the product of a contingent choice. It was adopted because it met the needs of political rule and social governance of its time. It was also the most successful, practical, and suitable moral system for the cultivation of individual virtue and the formation of a harmonious social order. It offered a cardinal strategy for maintaining long-lasting stability and security in Chinese society.

What are a woman's proper responsibilities in concrete terms? We cannot address this issue without engaging the Confucian doctrine of the Three Bonds

(*sangang*). As I mentioned, three of the five basic Confucian relations, the relations between ruler and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife, have been distinguished as the Three Bonds in order to stress their fundamental importance. Obviously, the original meaning of the Bond consists of both sides: in the case of husband and wife, the bond means that together they make a bond – a united force for making the family possible and powerful. Under this meaning of the bond, the union as well as the mutual assistance of each other is very much emphasized. As Dong Zhongshu commented, it is the normal way of Heaven that *yin* and *yang*, husband and wife, and father and son all exist interdependently and complementarily (Dong 1989, p. 73). On this meaning of the bond, one would be unjustified in accusing Confucianism of holding an unequal view of women and men – the view in fact emphasizes the importance of the mutual responsibilities between men and women.

However, it cannot be denied that the Three Bonds have also been used to mean the following: the ruler is the bond of the subject, the father is the bond of the son, and the husband is the bond of the wife. From this usage, a kind of authoritarianism and masculinism has been advocated on some interpretations. In the case of husband and wife, some have understood this usage of the bond to mean that the husband has authority over the wife, and that the wife should always obey the husband. Some have even taken this to mean that men are superior to women. Such interpretations are mistaken. I think the correct interpretation has been proposed by Jiang. According to him, the bond used here does not connote moral worth – that the man is superior to the woman – or that there is a power hierarchy, which implies that the woman should always submit to the man. It only connotes a meaning relating to managerial responsibility: the husband as the bond in the husband-wife relationship should bear more responsibility than the wife in managing it. This means that if the relation is broken, the major responsibility lies with the husband, not with the wife (Jiang 2008, p. 180). In this sense, if one does not object, we can translate the meaning of the Three Bonds into the “Three Cardinal Guides” (namely, that the ruler guides the subject, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife), where the meaning of “guide” is not one of power or authority, but only of management.

Of course, we should not overlook a major difference between the five relations (*wuchang*) and the Three Bonds. In each of the five relations, one’s moral obligation is reciprocal – if my friend does not want to treat me as a friend, my friendly obligation towards him would terminate as well. But the Three Bonds require much more – in fact, they require absolute moral obligations: even if my ruler is not a benevolent ruler, I still should be a faithful subject; even if my parent is not a kind parent, I still should be a filial child; and even if my husband is not a righteous husband, I still should be a good wife. This absolutely constitutes a one-dimensional moral requirement, which does not depend on what the other side is or does. As the Chinese philosopher He Lin pointed out in the 1940s, this kind of absolute one-dimensional moral requirement of the Three Bonds makes the Three Bonds in Confucian ethics constitute

something like Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative in Western ethics (He 1996). Of course, emphasizing the importance of such absolute one-dimensional moral requirements does not mean that the requirements should only be emphasized on the side of the subject, the child, or the wife, and not on the side of the ruler, the parent, or the husband. As Jiang points out, the discussions of the Three Bonds in traditional China tended to overlook the absolute requirements on the side of the ruler, the parent, and the husband, the oversight of which should now be corrected (Jiang 2002). However, the point is that the absolute one-dimensional moral requirement emphasized in the Three Bonds should not be understood as a problem within the doctrine. Rather, it is a brilliant moral norm.

At this point, three different perspectives on women have been presented: a kind of traditional Chinese masculinism, which sees women as inferior to men and expects them always to be obedient; modern Western feminism, which insists on absolutely equal rights and responsibilities between men and women; and finally, a complete and undistorted Confucian view (in particular, its reconstructed doctrine of the Three Bonds) of women, which disagrees with both masculinism and feminism. It does not hold that men and women have different moral worth so that either men are superior to women or women are superior to men. At the same time, it does not support the assignment of absolutely equal rights or responsibilities between men and women. Instead, it recommends that men should take on more managerial responsibilities in the man and woman relationship (such as the husband and wife relation). This chapter holds that this latter view is the proper view. It is consistent with the cardinal spirit of Confucianism regarding human life, both as a theoretical system and a practical wisdom. For this reason Confucianism, including the doctrine of the Three Bonds, understood properly as the "Three Cardinal Guides" in the sense of management, should be treated truthfully as managerial guidance in respective relations. For anyone who tries to learn from and apply Confucian wisdom to the contemporary world, the best way is to avoid the extremes of masculinism and absolute egalitarianism. One should find the following comments made by Jiang heuristic:

Confucianism supports neither masculinism nor feminism. Instead, it recognizes the differences between man and woman under the orderly combination of *yin* and *yang* in the universe. It is understandable that feminists have been opposed to arbitrary masculinism throughout history. But they should not move to another extreme in which they become blind to the differences between man and woman (Jiang 2002).

Confucianism throughout history has not been concerned with individual rights, either male or female. The primary Confucian concerns are virtue and responsibility. Modern feminists have positive things to learn from the Confucian view.

7.4 What Can Feminists Learn from Confucianism?

First, Confucius' ideal that "all should have an opportunity for education" is a great benevolent ideal that has been supported by feminists. In Confucius' time, education was only available to the nobles, not to ordinary people. Confucius not only announced this revolutionary ideal, he also practiced it in his time. Among his students there were quite a few from poor ordinary families. Given the limitations of his time, it was impossible for him to have female students. However, he certainly would not have objected to the education of women. In fact, Confucius himself was educated by his mother. From the fundamental virtue of *ren* (humanity or benevolence), which Confucius emphasizes most of all, women certainly should be loved and respected because it generally means that one must love all humans, although one must love one's parents and siblings more than others under the Confucian moral understanding. However, Confucius would not support a naive egalitarianism for treating all of his students. As is clearly shown in the *Analects*, Confucians hold that each student should be taught in ways that suit his personal character. Presumably, recognizing the physiological, psychological, and social differences between men and women, Confucius would not recommend that women and men should be taught in the exact same way under the slogan of equal rights.

Second, the Confucian appreciation of the importance of the family implies, among other things, that women should have a strong sense of family and should make an effort to become a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother within her life span. From the Confucian view, these are the most natural, objective, and important roles a woman can play. Some feminists suggest that women should employ their intelligence, independence, and autonomy in their work outside of the family. Such feminist views hold that they should show the richness of their lives in their work outside of the home and participate in social and political activities as much as possible. In their view, women should develop their own "subjectivity," which should be accepted by men and universally acknowledged. However, from the Confucian view, a woman's subjectivity is inherently related to the family and cannot be realized by distancing oneself from family life or even by completely giving up the family. Indeed, extreme feminists ask women to give up family values by remaining single to pursue one's "own" values. For Confucian women, this would mean that one has given up the core value of a woman for something that really is not most valuable for women. In this way, they have actually depreciated rather than enhanced themselves. In particular, giving up the right to bear children is tantamount to abandoning the very sense of rights they always talk about. From the Confucian view, it also abolishes the sacred responsibility of human reproduction that women are obliged to undertake. For Confucians, since human values are more important than other things, it is most important for a normal couple to reproduce and raise children as a means for cultivating virtue.

Finally, there are aspects of the Confucian view of marriage that should be appreciated and their functions should be exerted in contemporary society. Confucianism holds that marriage is sacred, and hence a decision to marry should never be made carelessly or without deliberation. For Confucians, the nature of marriage is grounded in Heaven, a marital decision is a response to the call of the Mandate of Heaven, and it is a step towards fulfilling human nature. The purpose of marriage involves human reproduction and survival. In the Chinese wedding, the bride and groom must bow to Heaven, Earth, and the ancestors. This is to help the newly married couple appreciate the profound meaning of their marriage. A marriage is not a contract between two individuals, but it gives rise to a family and a series of new social relationships, so the two relevant families must decide upon it. “A blessed marriage for a 100 years and familial prosperity for five generations” are usually used as the best wishes for a new couple from their relatives. As Jiang points out, the existence of man and woman is the manifestation of the Heavenly *Dao* of *yin* and *yang* in human society. A normal marriage formed by the union of a man and a woman is the embodiment of the Heavenly *Dao* in the human way. It is part of the content of the Heavenly *Dao*. Hence, human marriage has a metaphysical meaning, namely, a Heavenly transcendence (Jiang 2003, p. 215).

Jiang’s comments are supported by the words of Confucian classics. For example, in the classic *Zhongyong*, it states that “the way of the superior man is found to begin with the union of the husband and wife; in its utmost reaches, it shines brightly through Heaven and Earth” (*Zhongyong* 12; see Zhu 1983, p. 23). In the *Book of Rites*, we read,

A marriage is the union of two families of different surnames in friendship and love. It is in order to continue the posterity of the former sages, and to furnish those who shall preside at the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, at those in the ancestral temple, and at those at the altars to the spirits of the land and grain (Aigongwen; see Zhu Bin 1996, p. 742).

In contrast with the Confucian emphasis on the sacredness and long-lastingness of marriage, many modern marriages are characterized by indiscreet decisions and imprudent acts. Modern society is dominated by the shallow individualist notion that marriage is merely a contract between two individuals. Some young people even regard it as a short-term game meant only for pleasure. It has been reported that the shortest marriage in Shanghai lasted only for 1 day. Due to the prevalence of extreme selfishness and the over-emphasis of individual rights rather than responsibility, many individuals tend to insist obstinately on their own ideas and preferences and will not accommodate their spouses within their marriage. They eventually end up divorced as a consequence of over-asserting their “rights” or freedom. It is nothing to be proud of that the number of single-parent families is on the rise in most societies and even accounts for one-third of the total number of families in some countries. Such families have a hard time properly educating their children. If these children have rights, Confucians

would argue that such families have a hard time meeting the rights of their children to be loved and cared for by both parents in proper ways.

Contrary to the misunderstanding that the Confucian view of marriage ignores respect, the Confucian conception of marriage attaches significant importance to both love and respect. As it is remarked in the *Book of Rites*,

With the ancients in their practice of governance, the love of humans was the great point; in their exercise of this love, regulations according to rites were the great point; in their regulations according to rites, reverence was the great point. Of the great manifestation of reverence, we find its great illustration in the great rite of marriage (Aigongwen; see Zhu Bin 1996, p. 741).

Confucians hold that getting married is the best way to foster love and respect. They emphasize the idea that love is to spend both bad and good times with your beloved one, and it needs to be fostered and learned. The elder generation should tell the newly married to be respectful of each other. They should be modest, considerate, and tolerant of each other. Being respectful helps the couple learn each other's merit and how to overcome one's shortcomings so as to become harmonious with each other. Indeed, for Confucians, each side of the couple should improve oneself by learning from the other, understanding the other, and learning how to love through loving the other. Love is to shorten the distance between them, and respect is to keep a proper distance between them. This is why, in traditional Confucian families, there is a lot of aid and care for each other, which makes the mutual love long-lasting, even though to the modern ear they may not appear to have sufficient romance or sweet words for each other. Confucians give more attention to long-term happiness than to temporary pleasure. The ideal marriage, for Confucians, is one in which a couple can help each other, especially in harsh circumstances, live harmoniously, and age together until death. There is a poetic description of such an ideal marriage and family life in *The Classic of Poetry*, which is cited in the classic, *Zhongyong*:

A good union with your wife and living with your children is like the music of lutes and harps. When there is concord among brethren, the harmony is delightful and enduring. Thus may you regulate your family, and enjoy the happiness with your wife and children (*Zhongyong* 15).

Confucianism values harmony in a marriage and sets a lifelong marriage as the basic aim of marriage. Therefore, parents have to think seriously about what kind of person would be the perfect spouse for their child. For that purpose, the parents have to look at the family backgrounds and personalities of the potential spouses of their child. It is important to find out whether they are considerate and respectful of elderly people. In general, parents pay much attention to the personalities, characteristics, and abilities of the spouses of their children. Based on their own or others' marriage experiences, the involvement of parents in their child's decision to marry can effectively prevent the child from being too emotional or shortsighted, thereby ensuring the stability and harmony of the marriage. Even if one considers this an arranged marriage, it is still more desirable

than today's online-love or speedy marriages to gain profits. From the Confucian view, today's youngsters should be willing to listen to their parents' suggestions and to receive Confucian marriage wisdom, which has been tested for over 2000 years. Here Confucians think that liberty is only a means for gaining marital happiness. It is shameless for some scholars to think that the dramatic increase in the divorce rate of contemporary China is a good thing.

Marriage is also important because, as Confucians see it, the character of marriage in a society is inseparable from the character of its rites, morality, and politics. Confucianism understands marriage as the root of its politics. Promiscuous marriages lead to a messy society in many respects. As the classical Confucian Xunzi points out, "the way of marriage must be proper, for it is the root of the relationships between ruler and subject and between father and son" (Wang Tianhai 2005, p. 1054). Jiang has also remarked,

By observing the contemporary society and politics, we can find many examples of bad governance or social orders engendered by improperly playing the role of husband or wife. Governance is not only a use of power. It is affected by many factors, among which marriage is a significant factor that tremendously influences the operation of power (Jiang 2003, p. 228).

Evidently, many power-abusing phenomena in contemporary society, especially the immoral use of power by politicians, are closely related to marriages and the influence of spouses. It is right to the point for Confucianism to emphasize the importance of proper marriage and the upright ways of husband and wife in one's social life.

7.5 Towards a Proper Relationship Between Men and Women

In modern history Confucianism has been aggressively attacked for its views on women. It has been assumed that Confucianism holds the view that men are superior to women. As we have shown in this chapter, this is a distorted Confucian view. Starting in the early 20th century, radical scholars have ascribed gender discrimination and the oppression of women to Confucianism. This attack lasted through the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, when the pursuit of superficial equality between men and women reached its climax. However, as analyzed above, Confucianism itself holds a healthy and well-balanced view of woman. It should not be held directly responsible for the oppression of woman. Only when Confucianism is distorted can it become a tool for the oppression of women.

Some feminists may still want to put Confucianism into the theoretical framework of masculinism. However, such feminists may have made their arguments by following the logic of masculinism. This logic is closely connected to the traditional Western metaphysics, which creates a logocentrism in the Western way of thinking. According to logocentrism, the world is full of

oppositions between two sides where one side always dominates the other. Of course, nowadays there are various types of feminism with different theoretical frameworks, modes of thought, and political motivations. It may be difficult to describe feminism as a kind of unified trend in a simple way. Still, as it is well known, the term “feminism”, which appeared at the end of 19th century, refers to a social and political movement for the equal rights of woman, such as the rights of equal opportunity in employment, education, and voting. In the 18th century some Enlightenment thinkers treated the issue of women’s rights as a matter of basic human rights. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill, and *Women and New Race* (1920) by Margaret Sanger all attempted to reconstitute the concept of womanhood on the basis of a strong criticism of male authority and the oppression of woman. After World War II, *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir and *The Feminine Mystique* (1974) by Betty Friedan became the two most representative feminist works emphasizing the further liberation of woman. According to Simone de Beauvoir, gender difference is mainly caused by a culture of male authority – a patriarchal culture, which leads to a division between the self and one’s identity as a woman. In her eyes, the two words “male” and “female” are asymmetrical – they are not relational like the two poles of electricity. Instead, male is representative of both the masculine and the neutral since the word “man” is generally used to refer to both male and female, while female is confined by its feminist features (de Beauvoir 1974, pp. xvii–xviii).

Following de Beauvoir, some feminists continue to struggle for the equal rights of women in all disciplines and insist that women should work outside of their families and should transform their minds and bodies to realize their individual freedom or self-determination. Naomi Wolf even characterizes what is happening as the great earthquake of gender in which women must act (Wolf 1993, p. 11). Some feminists try their best to argue that there is no significant difference in the feelings, psychological orientation, or ways of thinking and behaving between men and women. For them, gender differences are mainly the product of our social and cultural systems. They stress that, as a matter of fact, in some cases the differences between two men are more substantial than those between two women. Indeed, extreme feminists insist that women should adopt male standards as their own standard and act like men in all fields. Some of them even regard marriage and family as tombs for women. As a result, there is a new kind of tendency in which extreme feminism is developed into a new ideology, which brings men and women into a state of war with each other. Traditional research concerning the differences between men and women in the behavioral sciences and physiology has been frustrated as a result.

No doubt, Confucians should respect and take seriously the critique of distorted Confucianism by all reasonable feminists. According to the fundamental Confucian virtue of humanity (*ren*), gender discrimination, which sees women as inferior to men, is misguided. As I have shown, the Confucian virtue of humanity requires that everyone be loved and respected, regardless of gender differences.

We respect a woman not only because she is female, but first because she is a human being. Under distorted Confucianism, women have been unfairly discriminated against. However, it is reasonable and important to recognize that the complete Confucian view of women is proper and emphasizes a harmonious and complementary relation between men and women. No reasonable contemporary feminist should object to this Confucian perspective. Indeed, reasonable feminists do not want to change themselves into men, nor do they want to measure everything by the ruler of man. The liberation of women is not worthwhile if it only changes women into men (Brennen 1996, p. 92). If women act like men, it simply means that women have transformed themselves into a model of man. In this way, rather than rejecting masculinism, it is simply cloaked by the name of feminism. Thus, extreme feminism is nothing but a disguised masculinism. In contrast, reasonable feminists should not wish to give up their feminine character. Rather, they should, as Confucians do, understand their female character as the embodiment of a profound reality and the richness of life.

Both masculinism and extreme feminism treat gender differences from the perspective of an opposition between men and women. Confucianism, on the other hand, regards gender differences from a mutually complementary and beneficial perspective. Confucians do not want to wipe out the differences between men and women. On the contrary, they respect these differences and hold that men and women should develop and fulfill their own characteristics. This not only manifests the Heavenly *Dao* in the human world, but it also promotes the richness of human life as well as the happiness of men and women. The opposition and struggle men and women would experience in a culture war is not only harmful to both men and women, but also to the development and prosperity of human beings. From the Confucian perspective, the more men and women develop their respective characteristics, the richer the content of life will be, and the more human beings as a whole will flourish. The happiness of human beings depends on the harmony and cooperation of men and women, while a culture war between them will destroy human flourishing. Accordingly, humans should move beyond masculinism and feminism as well as the opposition and struggle between men and women. As Jiang points out, “the way of Heaven is the unity of differences, and the world of life is interdependent” (Jiang 1995, p. 388).

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