

CONFUCIAN AND FEMINIST NOTIONS OF RELATIONAL SELF AND RECIPROCITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Confucian ethics and feminist ethics of 'care' both emphasize people's interdependency, positioning 'ren' and 'care,' respectively, as the most fundamental value of their ethical theories. Both argue that care as a theory and practice can extend to the public domain to accomplish its task of taking care of all people in need. Nevertheless, there are significant differences both historically and conceptually between the two theories. My goal in this paper is to clarify whether the Confucian notion of selfhood, because of its deep commitment to social harmony and hierarchy, excludes a serious engagement in the social ideal of equality and in gender equality in particular. I will also explore the ways in which attention to the Confucian notion of selfhood can enrich the feminist notions of reciprocity and 'self-other relationships'. Both can learn from each other to enrich an understanding of ourselves.

Scholars have begun to recognize that the 'relational view of the self' developed by Western feminists has interesting parallels to the Confucian notion of the *self*. I will explore the parallels between the two concepts of self: is the feminist concept of the relational self a helpful one for understanding (and undertaking a critique of) the status of women in contemporary China? And what lessons can Western feminists learn by attending to the Confucian notion of the self?

Confucian ethics and feminist ethics of care both emphasize people's interdependency, positioning *ren* and *care*, respectively, as the most fundamental value of their ethical theories. Both argue that care as a theory and practice can extend to the public domain to accomplish its task of taking care of all people in need. Nevertheless, there are significant differences both historically and conceptually between the two theories. My goal in this paper is to clarify whether the Confucian notion of selfhood, because of its deep commitment to social harmony and hierarchy, excludes a serious engagement in the social ideal of equality and in gender equality in particular. I will also explore the ways in which attention to the Confucian notion of *selfhood* can enrich the feminist notions of reciprocity and 'self-other relationships'. Both can learn from each other to enrich an understanding of ourselves.

I will start with an interpretation from two perspectives and examine debates on Confucian ethics and its oppressive views of women and how the value of care extends to social issues. Next, I will closely examine Confucian and feminist

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notions of reciprocity and will focus on Beauvoir's "reciprocal claim". Finally I will reflect on some investigations of women's realities in southern China and in Beijing to see the value of communitarian care practices and how they may be integrated with concerns of individual choice, social justice, and public care.

I. Extending the Value of Care to Social Issues

Since early 1980s feminist philosophers have explored the value of care in the study of ethics, investigating issues of valuing care as a balance to our obligation of benevolent concern for people generally on the principle of justice. In *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (2006), Virginia Held (VH) comprehends and furthers previous care thinkers such as Noddings (1984), Tronto (1995), Kittay (1999), Robinson (1999), etc. She notices that one way in which the ethics of care does resemble Confucian ethics is in its rejection of the sharp split between public and private, "an extension of private morality" (Held, 2006: 21). It should be noted that both theories emphasize the crucial notion of relational self and interdependency between persons at home and in public as well. Nevertheless, as Held argues, the history of the development of contemporary ethics of care is the history of recent feminist progress. It started with the endorsement and validation of women's experience and challenges the most entrenched hierarchy of gender; its fundamental commitment is to the equality of women in various ways and provides insightful analysis of how women became oppressed by the myth of power as relationship.

Some scholars argue that Confucian thought can make a contribution to the study of political philosophy more generally through a comparison with Rawls' sense of justice as fairness (*Dao*, 2007: 361-381). Cline made a comment on the *Analects* 1.6,

First, Kongzi mentions filiality at home, second, respect for elders in the community, and third, care for others who are not in one's immediate circle of family, friends, and acquaintances ... Individuals who cultivate filiality and respect in their relationships with their parents and elders are also likely to develop a strong sense of accountability to and responsibility to those beyond one's own family and community is a part of being Ren, the highly cultivated state that represents the perfection of human character (*Dao*, 2007: 367).

In both Kongzi and Mengzi, *ren* refers to the complete mastery of all virtues. When a person embodies the sum total of virtuous qualities (*ren, yi, li, zhi*) through self-cultivation, the person is considered fully human. Such family oriented ethical thought serves well as a general moral guide for dealing with public life, and it is compatible with feminist thinking of caring justice.

Held examines the potential of the ethics of care for dealing with social issues beyond the domains of family and friends. According to Held, the ethics of care envisions caring not as in the case of male domination, but as it should be practiced in post patriarchal society. In the realities of women in a patriarchal society, caring justice will be the priority in the cases of domestic violence or abusive

relationships in the family. Here we can see the balancing approach of justice and care but not slavery care without resistance. Nevertheless, as Held points out, in political and economic contexts, “care as benevolence and as motive fails to understand the relations of power that can so easily undermine the value of care.” But, as she states, “when we focus on relations, we can come to see how to shape good caring relations so that differences in power will not be pernicious and so that the vulnerable are empowered” (Held, 2006: 56). Good caring relations must include not only mutual recognition of moral equality but also practices which avoid coercion, disrespect, and inconsideration.

This thought led Shun to wonder and raise the question whether the Confucian conception of personhood allows room for the notions of autonomy and rights (Shun, 2004: 193). MacIntyre commented on Shun’s thoughts, “Yet the traditional hierarchical structures of Confucian society involved a practical denial of the capacity for reflective self-direction of the vast majority of those whose work sustained them: women, farmers, and fishing crews, more generally those engaged in productive manual labor” (Shun 2004: 210). He also raises a significant question barely brought about by other scholars in the field, “So the question is posed: what social, political, and economic form would a Confucianism take that was not oppressive and exploitative, that gave to women their due place within the family and to workers their due place within political and economic society?” (Shun 2004: 211). This call for answers shows a lack of serious analysis of contemporary Confucian ethics on social issues such as the social ideal of equality for women and further for all powerless people.

Given the general thought of *ren* as a method of benevolence and the sum total of all virtues (*ren, yi, li, zhi, xin*), the correct English translation of *ren* should be a sense of general fairness toward others not a single individual virtue as “benevolence”. Perhaps early Confucian thinkers can offer similar thought on the feminist notions of caring justice as long as the gender bias opinions could be deleted from the later non-genuine Confucianism. The social ideal of gender equality can only become a reality for women under a post patriarchy society, as Held claims, and the changes toward such an ideal society should reflect continuous feminist progress. The genuine notion of *ren* in a relational self perhaps can be quite compatible with feminist notions of caring relations.

Tu Weiming’s Tasaan Lecture (Tu, 2001) expresses similar thoughts to reply to the challenge of a male-oriented ideal of self-cultivation. He insists the Confucian notion of selfhood is applicable to all people, “Self-cultivation is neither gendered nor elitist. As the *Great Learning* notes, each of us ‘from the Emperor to the commoner, all without exception, ...must regard self-cultivation as the root.’” However, Tu states women’s three ‘follows’ and obedience to men (following her father in her youth, her husband when married, and her son when her husband dies) in the *Book of Rites*, which clearly denotes the subordinate status of Chinese women. Does this mean that Confucian idea of the family is outmoded? Tu’s answer is negative, and he believes that the Confucian family without the “three bonds” can still underscore affection between parent and child, and genuine cooperation between husband and wife. According to Tu, the five human relationships are all based on mutuality, or the principle of reciprocity.

Some feminist critique would disagree with Tu by saying “Confucianism differs from feminism in its emphasis on self-cultivation over the fights for rights and justice.” But Tu responds in a way of appealing to Rosement’s assessment of

the liberal conception of the self. In Tu's view, Confucianism seems to offer a sensible start by stressing personal responsibility, communal rituals, and the common good of the community. He claims, "[Despite] an apparently rigid hierarchy, Confucianism cherishes at its heart, equality in education and the *Li* (pattern, principle) of change. These two principles, an equal opportunity to learning and an attitude of openness and flexibility, do not counter feminism. Rather, this is where the two philosophies meet and where they are most able to reinforce each other" (Tu, 2001).

Both Tu and Shun's interpretations of the Confucian view of rights and equality do not offer strong arguments but only weak or vague implications and idealist thoughts on Confucianism. MacIntyre's call for more serious analysis of Confucian ethics on the social issues of equality has not been answered yet. We need to take a close look at the core value of Confucian originality and the principle of reciprocity, to see what the two philosophies share or do not share in their notions of reciprocity.

II. Reciprocity in Relationship

Hu Shi (1891-1962), a PhD who returned to China from the US and was also deeply influenced by Confucianism, expressed his disagreement with the "Confucian view of chastity". In regard to the issue of women's chastity, Hu explains that chastity is concerned with the relationship between couples. A wife should respect her husband's love, and the husband should respect hers; otherwise, he will not deserve respect and chastity. "This is exactly what Confucius said: Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (Hu, 1986 [1918] 49-50). He holds a view that Confucius himself should not advocate single sex ethics, although Confucius does not discuss the issue of women's chastity.

Obviously, Hu uses Confucius' own words to attack the later Confucian view of women's chastity. He clearly separates Confucius and the Neo-Confucian view of women and criticizes the latter as violating Confucius' golden rule. Nevertheless, the Confucian concept of *ren* does not equally apply to women's ethical experiences as it applies to men's. Because of the gender hierarchy, the golden rule was not equally applicable to women as it was to men in the patriarchal society. The ethics of care being critical of social relations of power becomes crucial in Held's 'five features of the ethics of care,' which examines a good caring relationship and the value of care. Held argues that the value of care should not lead to an oppressive view of women who predominantly undertake the job of care at home and in public sector. Contemporary Confucians must pay attention to the power impact analysis of the five major social relations in its theory of social harmony. Nevertheless, what can Confucian ethics offer to the thought of reciprocity in general?

Consider *Analects*, Book 15.24: "Is there one teaching that can serve as a guide for one's entire life?" The master answers, "Is it not Shu, 'sympathetic understanding'? Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire." As Zengzi said, "All of what the Master teaches amounts to nothing more than Zhong, 'loyalty,' tempered by Shu, 'sympathetic understanding.'" (Yang, 1980: 4.15)

In *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China*. (1999) Ames and Hall argue that the qualitative notion of equality in Confucius' Golden Rule, the Confucian concept of reciprocity, can

provide insights of gender equality. By a qualitative notion, they refer to one's self-cultivation: One can be identified by a complex of social roles; "It is the quality of these roles that focuses one's identity, which is constitutive of one's self" (Ames and Hall, 1999: 198). The argument looks like this: Equality, construed in individualistic terms, is a quantitative notion (the definition of persons as autonomous individuals militates against the notion of goods held in common). On the other side, the Confucian community likes an extended family, with resolutely hierarchical relations, but these roles and relations are reciprocal. "The roles of communal benefactor and beneficiary alternate over time. Therefore, Confucianism offers important, largely unused, resources for overcoming gender inequities." (Ames and Hall, 1999: 161) The example they show to support the idea of reciprocity is father to son: a son's duties will be balanced by his privileges as a parent; similarly one's role as benefactor during middle age will be paid back when one grows old. We can see similar thought in the ethics of care.

In *Love's Labor*, Kittay argues that we are all some mother's child, and we should be equal in the sense that we inevitably need that human interdependence. She raises a notion of 'Reciprocity-in-Connection,' which denies individual exchange reciprocity. She significantly points out that reciprocation is based not on the care her mother gave her daughter and which she now expects her daughter to return. That would turn the mother's care for her daughter into a sort of advance payment for later care—a maneuver typical of 'exchange reciprocity.' The daughter instead invokes a set of nested obligations. The fulfillment of those obligations is now her responsibility and hers uniquely. If she does not do the caring, "no one else will." (Kittay, 1999: 67)

Kittay is right to point out that we are all some mother's child, and we are equal in the sense of interdependence to each other. Hence, care as a value should be the priority. But we also see a difference between the parent-child relationship and the husband-wife relationship. Women must play their obedience roles appropriately under Confucian gender role theory, and most likely a woman is the benefactor rather than a beneficiary. Such concerns can be sufficient enough to demand Confucian ethics to extend its moral psychology to a sociological exploration as an update in studying issues of gender equality.

Ames and Hall could reply to the above response, "Hierarchy need not be as rigid and inflexible as it is often thought to be" (Ames and Hall, 1999: 160). According to their view, the concept of a person as a specific matrix of roles "will not tolerate any assertion of natural equality." From this natural inequality as a descriptive claim, Neo-Confucianism goes to a prescriptive claim implicated in women's obedience, that women should be humble and men respectable. Zhu Xi claims: "A wife submits herself to the will of another; her rectitude consists of not following her own will," (Raphals, 1998: 255), which is a devaluation of women, not merely natural inequality. The conflicts between the reciprocal and the hierarchical relations of persons have not been explained in their arguments to save Confucianism from sexism. Here, we need to see feminist insights on issues of who gets power over whom, how to empower the powerless and how to share power in connection based equality (Allen, 1999).

There is another line of arguments on issues of reciprocity to explain women's oppressive situations, which differs from concerns of individual quantity equality. Simone de Beauvoir worked out an original form of feminism based on the existentialist philosophy she and Sartre had developed. Sartre's existentialist view

argues that we are all free to create ourselves through constantly choosing and acting. So there is no human essence in us; rather we are absolutely free to make what we are, and we must be responsible for what we have chosen. Sartre holds that one is fundamentally aware of other people as beings who are free, or who are subjects (who are not objects but are the authors of their lives). One becomes aware of others as free beings, whenever he experiences himself being looked at by them (Sartre, 1943: 259). According to Sartre every experience of being looked-at threatens one's freedom, but we can reassert our freedom by determining to view any other person whose look threatens us as a mere object, defined by their body and by fixed properties, and so not really qualified to threaten our own freedom. Beauvoir sums up this situation as one that "sets up a reciprocal claim" Beauvoir (1949:17 from Stone 2007: 194).

Beauvoir states, throughout history women have failed to make these reciprocal claims (Beauvoir 1949: 17-18). Men have followed their tendency to objectify women, but women have not objectified men in turn. Instead, women have accepted and internalized men's view that they are defined by their bodies and their fixed characteristics. So man is the norm and woman is other than the subject: woman as *Otherness*. This notion of woman as Other has three parts: first, women have spent all of their time on childbirth and childcare, while men hunted, so men created values and women accept men's objectifying view of them; second, in their acceptance of the men's objectifying view women allowed that view to pervade western culture and as objects, women did not exercise their freedom to choose; thirdly, if women were exercising their freedom they would probably be judged to be acting contrary to 'women's nature', which would arouse many men's hostility. Hence, it benefits women to collude with men's view of them (Stone, 2007, 195). In Beauvoir's view women are deceived and seduced into self-deception by men, so it is not completely women's fault but rather they are oppressed (Beauvoir 1949: 29). Clearly, "Here Beauvoir defines oppression as being deceived or tempted into not exercising one's freedom" (Stone, 2007, 196). The lack of 'reciprocal claim' is the root of women's oppression. But why is that women cannot set up reciprocal claim for their beings as subjects? Jack Reynolds explains that Beauvoir's notion of freedom is different from Sartre: ontological or absolute freedom on the one hand, but also a more practical freedom, "that is freedom to do something or to effect concrete changes in the world." If women lack practical freedom for long enough then they cannot conceive of changing things in the world and this can actually impinge on their ontological freedom. "In other words, if some people are oppressed for long enough their ontological freedom can actually be modified and reduced." (Reynolds, 2006: 144). That is the case for some women and therefore, Beauvoir thinks women are not acting in bad faith when they do not revolt against sexual inequality. Nevertheless, she argues that women should be held partially responsible for their oppression.

The notion of reciprocity in Confucianism also has different meanings for men and for women and could not be a similar rule for all people, especially the oppressed and vulnerable. Beauvoir helps us to clarify why women could be the oppressed through some kind of reciprocity. Nevertheless, do we need to abandon the notion of reciprocity based on a sense of interdependence among members of community but not just between individuals (which is compatible with the Confucian ethics)? The answer would be "no". Held points out: "Noticing interdependencies, rather than thinking only or largely in terms of independent

individuals and their individual circumstances is one of the central aspects of an ethics of care. A caring person will cultivate mutuality in the interdependencies of personal, political, economic, and global contexts” (Held, 2006: 53). Here we can see feminist and Confucian ethics reinforce each other in the spirit of relational self and self-other relations, without coercion or oppression idealistically. Confucius claims in the *Analects Book 9.4*, “free of four faults: arbitrariness, inflexibility, rigidity, and selfishness.” These words show that Confucius is so open minded that he could not allow rigid sexism or an oppressive view of women.

III. Community Care and Communitarian Values

Held argues, “There can be care without justice, but there can be no justice without the care that has value” (Held, 2006: 134). Hence the care value should be prior but compatible with rights. The Confucian ethics would agree with her by offering the thoughts of self-cultivation, learning to be moral or humanitarian, and maintaining peace and harmony in family and society. But some feminist critiques of community, such as those raised by Iris Marion Young, give us deeper insight into possible problems in valuing community. “Insofar as the ideal of community entails promoting a model of face-to-face relations as best, it devalues and denies difference in the form of temporal and spatial distancing. The ideal of a society consisting of decentralized face-to-face communities is undesirably utopian in several ways” (Young, 1990: 302). Following are some examples in Chinese community work to show why care should be the priority.

According to Jung Yul Moon, “A Study of Dagongmei (maid labors),” the two major social divisions in China, rural-urban disparity and gender inequality are serious problems calling for social attention. In her conclusion, Moon claims, “Not only is gender inequality a severe problem in China, but women in rural areas are worse off compared to their counterparts in urban areas” (*AJWS*, 2003: 60). In Moon’s study, we can see that Chinese women, especially the migrant maiden workers, are losing out from the visible market competitions. Tan Shen also did a survey of migrant women workers in southern China. She points out that although China’s labor laws and the local labor statutes clearly regulate labor contracts, working hours, minimum wage, labor protection, and social insurance, “the rights and interests of migrant women workers are frequently violated” (Tao, 2004: 254). There are other serious problems related with violations of these women’s rights such as sexual harassment, the sex trade, and education of their children. These issues call for more than law enforcement; more fundamental changes are needed to improve women’s status in the state policy, cultural norms, market values, etc. One of the Confucius’ advices for governing the country would be “To govern is to correct. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?” (*Analects 12: 17*). The virtue of righteousness is crucial in leadership, and the ruler’s self-cultivation is intimately related to the social order. Their cultivated character will also have a transformative effect on other human beings. Certainly current social injustice demands more than a benevolent government, but Confucian ethics emphasizes the importance of people’s inner virtues and affections for others to keep social order.

The post-Mao government has kept Mao’s commitment for women’s equality and tried to focus on community construction and service through a call of taking humanity as a *Root* principle which serves everyone including women. The city of

Beijing has built 107 residential community centers and almost 3,000 service stops since 1998 (Ma, 2003: 124). Cai Wenmei, professor of Peking University, argues that old aged people should be taken care of at home through community services and should not be sent to senior centers (Ma, 2003: 127). According to her, living at home is the best way for old people to enjoy the rest of their life, and actually, it is desirable for the old through the investigations of their choices. For example, Hepingli residential community realizes old people's needs and interests and organizes various forms of activity to energize their lives such as calligraphy and drawing group, singing and dancing group, sports and games associations, etc. Retired and elderly people get together with regular meetings in order to communicate with each other and to share their common interests. The goals of community are to take care of the two important stages of life: birth and old age. Laid-off and unemployed women get service jobs and are able to practice public care in their own resident community. This benefits both the family and society in general. Li shumun states that everyone is going to be old and need help, so helping the old is to help one's self. For today's *old* and tomorrow's *self* we must care for everyone and view care as the most important value in a good life.

The Women Studies Center of Peking University conducted a survey of elder women's lives in the western suburb of Beijing in 2008 (Wei, 2008): most of them are lower income or poor women. According to the survey of 304 women ranging in age from 60 to over 80 and few over 90, one third of them were living with their children or relatives, less than two third were living near by family members with close contacts, and one sixth of them were living with three generations of family. All of them except one expressed their will of living with family rather than being alone. The purpose of the survey was to make suggestions regarding laws that protect elder women's rights and interests. Thus, the survey laid out many questions about those women's everyday activities and about their economic status, health care, medical situations, etc.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, what Confucian and feminist ethics of care share is the qualitative equality, a connection based reciprocity, through the "shen" "xin" unity in a person of self-cultivation in social network collaborations. The question is whether or not a woman can follow the rites as so highly respected in the Confucian texts yet simultaneously find self fulfillment and demand equality and respect in today's more progressive world. I believe the answer to be yes; there is compatibility. Early Confucianism summarizes the importance of human virtues into the *ren*, the *ren* being ultimately the most important and simply underlying virtue to follow at all times. *Ren* presents itself much like the ethics of care, where awareness of the need to care for the other is ultimate importance and is the best avenue for making decisions. If one abides by *ren*, one will be a help to others and be compassionate toward their needs. Feminist versions of care ethics offer critical approaches to examine human relations in a social structure and framework including a balancing approach of care and justice. Both can learn from each other to enrich a better ideal of gender equality.

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