

Mathew Foust and Sor-Hoon Tan (editors)  
*Feminist Encounters with Confucius*  
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This book adds to the growing scholarship engaged with the field of comparative feminist studies on Confucianism, which is still in its inceptive stage. As noted by Mathew Foust and Sor-Hoon Tan in their "Introduction," the engagement between Confucianism and feminism didn't really take root until 2000 (4). Ever since, there has been a steady stream of publications in journals, monographs, and anthologies engaging in a feminist reflection on the Confucian philosophical tradition. But almost all of the publications to date have come from sinologists, attracting very little attention from the rest of the philosophical community. Given the fact that philosophy is the most male-dominated discipline in the humanities, graduating even fewer female doctoral students than math, economics, and chemistry (Haslanger 2013) and has the least diversified curriculum, with only 10% of its 118 doctoral programs in the US and Canada offering Chinese philosophy (Garfield and Van Norden 2016), feminists must lead the way in taking philosophy out of its Euro-phallo-centric mode of being and reasoning. The fact that *Hypatia*, a top-tier journal of feminist philosophy, provides a much needed space and exposure for comparative feminist studies on Confucianism is itself a cause for celebration, indicative of a genuinely inclusive future for the philosophical community. To be a feminist, in part, is to strive to end gender-based oppression not just for oneself but for minority women on the margins as well, and hence cultural inclusivity should be a built-in feature of feminism. Foust and Tan's *Feminist Encounters with Confucius* provides an entry point for meaningful encounters between the feminist community writ large and Confucianism, an intellectual tradition that has touched countless lives in Asia throughout the ages, yet still remains at the margins of the Western intellectual world. This need not be the case; through these meaningful feminist encounters with Confucianism, a bilateral cultural exchange can thus begin.

This anthology, as Foust and Tan remark, is intended not just to demonstrate the ways in which Confucianism and feminism can come to terms with each other, but more important, to imagine that "these traditions can *respond* to each other, and in many cases, *fortify* one another when joined and deployed to address contemporary philosophical problems" (11). In other words, this

anthology aims to go beyond a one-sided feminist critique of Confucianism for its historical and textual connections to sexism. Without a doubt, textual misogyny in the Confucian tradition and its likely historical contributions to gender-based oppression need to be interrogated fully, since that is the starting point of an emerging feminist consciousness that homes in on any and all gender-based oppression. But the trouble is, in cross-cultural studies, feminist or otherwise, a sense of genuine curiosity for learning and understanding the intellectual traditions of the unfamiliar other is often foreclosed by the implicit but entrenched racial/cultural hierarchy passed down to us since the Enlightenment. This implicit racial/cultural hierarchy often underpins our subconscious bias when encountering non-Western intellectual traditions. After all, given its supposed backwardness in economic, social, political, and historical development, can a presumed racially inferior culture offer anything of value to the Western world? The implicit racial/cultural hierarchy is explicit in the common dissection of the globe into developed, developing, and third-world countries. The cultures and traditions associated with those second- and third-world countries are thereby deemed *a priori* to be unworthy of our learning and understanding. Confucianism, for instance, has long been judged to be unworthy of feminist engagement beyond a simple repudiation (Lang 1946; Snow 1967; Kristeva 1977; Andors 1983; Wolf 1994; Held 2006; Noddings 2010). Against this common perception of Confucianism, Foust and Tan's anthology aims to go beyond a unilateral feminist pronouncement of the backwardness of Confucianism.

Gender-based oppression is a real problem, historically and now. Its ubiquity adds urgency to the rising feminist consciousness, but at the same time should bring a note of caution to cross-cultural studies so as not to exaggerate the degree to which the patriarchy and misogyny supposedly found in those "backward" cultures provide empirical confirmation for our already entrenched and implicit racial bias. For instance, it is true that Confucianism has been historically associated (in China) with various sexist practices, and there are numerous places in Confucian texts that justify the charge of misogyny that lends support to ongoing gender-based oppression. But that does not mean that all things sexist in China, for example, are rooted in Confucianism, which then is presumed to foster a particularly severe form of misogyny unparalleled in human civilization. The tendency of modern readers in their cross-cultural encounters is to anachronistically compare "backward" traditions with our modern and supposedly progressive Western society. If cultural backwardness is what one assumes of Confucianism, then that is what one will find. Indeed, as Foust and Tan write, "[i]t is too simplistic to blame Confucius' philosophy for sexist practice . . ." (7). Sexism is a shared human past, ingrained in almost all human civilization, and hence there is nothing revolutionary in finding connections between Confucian philosophy and gender-based oppression, historically and textually.

As an enduring intellectual tradition, Confucianism has much to offer to the world. Much like Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Kant, Nietzsche, and so on, Confucius is no feminist and hence to postulate a full reconciliation between any of these canonical textual traditions with the decisively modern movement of feminism is disingenuous. As Foust and Tan note, "it is equally mistaken to think that reconciling the philosophy with feminism by eliminating and reconstructing apparently sexist Confucian concepts or theories, or showing that Confucius shares certain core values with feminists, will absolve Confucius and Confucianism of all complicity in sexist practice" (7). Is such an absolution even possible? The simple answer is: no.

Confucianism will never be absolved of its sexist past, since sexism is an integral feature of that society's past. The same can be said for the Western canonical textual traditions.

If one surveys the feminist scholarship appearing in top-tier journals in the West, like *Hypatia* for example, much of it relies on Western canonical texts rife with misogyny. For instance, Lina Papadaki's "Kantian Marriage and Beyond: Why It Is Worth Thinking about Kant on Marriage" offers a defense of Kant's approach to marriage in spite of Kant's well-publicized textual misogyny (Papadaki 2010). And in spite of the widespread view of Kantian agency as excessively individualistic and autonomous, Paul Formosa's "The Role of Vulnerability in Kantian Ethics" proceeds to offer a *Kantian* take on the role of vulnerability in response to the feminist debate on autonomy and vulnerability in human existence (Formosa 2014). No scholarship that I have read so far has said that we need to abandon Kant because of his overtly textual misogyny and his intimate role in contributing to the scientific racism formulated in the late eighteenth century (Eze 1997; Louden 2000; Bernasconi 2002; Eigen and Larrimore 2006; McCarthy 2009; Mikkelsen 2013; Flikschuh and Ypi 2014; Vial 2016). On the contrary, Kant's cosmopolitanism and universal ethics are often upheld as the pivotal achievement of the European Enlightenment. Confucianism, an equally enduring intellectual tradition, should at least be given as much consideration despite the impossibility of absolving it of its own sexist past.

If the aim is understanding coupled with a sense of genuine curiosity for cross-cultural learning, the possible ways in which Confucianism can be imagined are endless, but then so are the possibilities for disagreement regarding its proper interpretation as it intersects with feminist thought. For instance, various contributors to this anthology have different takes on the feminist potential of the concept of *li* (ritual), *yinyang* cosmology, and *zhengming* (rectification of name). Ann Pang-White in chapter 1, "Confucius and the *Four Books for Women (Nü sishu)*," sees the feminist potential of ritual as shown in the *Nü sishu (The Four Books for Women)* in which these four historical women authors--Ban Zhao, the Song sisters, Empress Renxiao Wen, and woman Liu--use the concept of ritual to advance various causes for women, such as women's education and women's authorship (18). George Wrisley and Samantha Wrisley, in chapter 3, "Beyond Sexism: The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Confucianism," focus on the possible abuse accompanying the Confucian emphasis on hierarchical relationships and the ritual requirement of deference from the junior to the senior (80). Confucian *li* with its specific requirement of deference in a hierarchal relationship, in this intersectional approach, seems to be ripe for abuse in empirical cases. Ranjoo Seodu Herr, in chapter 2, "Confucian Mothering: The Origin of Tiger Mothering?," attributes women's inferior status to the incorporation of the concept of *yinyang* as articulated by Dong Zhongshu into Confucianism (43), whereas Taine Duncan and Nicholas Brasovan in chapter 9, "Contemporary Ecofeminism and Confucian Cosmology," maintain that the neo-Confucian *yinyang* cosmology, along with the concept of *he* (harmony) and *qi* (vital energy), provide a plausible means to reflectively critique classical Confucianism and to advance an ecofeminist model of being in the world.

For Duncan and Brasovan, the concept of *li* and the concept of *zhengming* (rectification of name) are deeply problematic as they support "patriarch-chauvinistic views and practices" [*sic*] (234) and hence are incompatible with the ecofeminist worldview that rejects both patriarchy and human chauvinism. But for Kevin DeLapp, in chapter 5, "Role Epistemology: Confucian

Resources for Feminist Standpoint Theory," *zhengming*, along with the concept of remonstrance (*jian*), are seen as possible tools "for examining biased assumptions about why certain roles are gendered in certain ways" (141) and hence for providing ways for women to go beyond the traditional confines of *nei*/domesticity to achieve their full personhood. Confucian emphasis on the relational self as an embodiment of various social roles, instead of being a liability, is interpreted by both Karyn Lai, in chapter 4, "Confucian Reliability and Epistemic Agency: Engagements with Feminist Epistemology," and DeLapp, in chapter 5, as an asset, as it strengthens feminist standpoint theory by attending to the social aspects of epistemic agency and justification. For Lai, Confucian reliability (*xin*) as a characteristic feature of the exemplary Confucian person (*junzi*) helps address the problem of "procedural objectivity" (a relatively objective way to investigate a knowledge claim) as it invokes both relatively stable communal norms as the epistemic starting point and the exemplary person's ability to adjudicate the epistemic validity of these norms by being situationally attuned (107). For DeLapp, by grounding epistemic justification in the social roles that constitute one's self, Confucian epistemology is able to avoid the pitfalls of radical subjectivity and false universalism (127).

Relational selfhood is a shared feature of both Confucians and many Western feminists, as pointed out by Andrew Komashinski and Stephanie Midori Komashin in chapter 6, "How Relational Selfhood Rearranges the Debate between Feminists and Confucians." But beyond the general agreement of a rejection of a Modern Self that is atomistic, autonomous, and independent, there lie many divergent opinions both across and within the Confucian and feminist communities as to what it means to have a relational personhood (152). Despite the many similarities between Confucian *ren* and care ethics, Andrew Lambert, in chapter 7, "Confucian Ethics and Care: An Amicable Split?," proposes a split between the two; instead of subsuming Confucian ethics under care ethics, Lambert suggests that Confucian ethics should be seen as a form of relational ethics that can yield a nonfeminist form of care (180). Instead of focusing on theoretical disputes regarding the conceptual compatibility between Confucianism and a certain strain of feminist theory, Herr, in chapter 2, and Sarah A. Mattice, in chapter 8, "Confucian Role Ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Domestic Violence, Same-sex Marriage, and Christian Family Values," discuss the practical applications of Confucianism to contemporary issues. According to Herr, although tiger mothering, popularized by Amy Chua boasting about the effective parenting style associated with her Chinese ethnic background, has its origin in Confucian mothering, the former is not morally justified, since it focuses only on achieving academic excellence at the expense of everything else. By contrast, Confucian mothering, with some modification, could be instructive for our modern society, since it aims to teach children moral and civic values by instilling in them a sense of self-discipline, persistence, and perseverance (65). For Mattice, plausible arguments can be made from within the framework of Confucian ethics consistent with the feminist commitment on issues of domestic violence, same-sex marriage, and abortion (224).

Despite the differing takes on the same Confucian concepts such as *li*, *yinyang*, and *zhengming*, each chapter nevertheless goes beyond a simple repudiation of the Confucian sexist past, teasing out, both theoretically and practically, novel possibilities in various Confucian concepts in response to feminist issues. These new possibilities then in turn enrich both feminism and Confucianism as each ingredient is enhanced and its efficacy actualized in a harmonious culinary creation. As a result, Confucianism and feminism each become greater than they were in this

purposeful cross-cultural encounter. By engaging comparative feminist studies in this way, we should be able to spur further engagement interculturally in order to address the ubiquity of gender disparity globally, as Foust and Tan hope with the publication of this new anthology (11). And in this way, we would also be able to restore a sense of genuine curiosity and thirst for learning that has for ages accompanied our cross-cultural encounters prior to the rise of racial hierarchy during the Enlightenment. As the Enlightenment's progeny in this postcolonial world, we all have to wrestle consciously and continuously with its legacy of racial hierarchy still implicitly assumed in our cross-cultural encounters, feminist or otherwise.

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