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# Moral Mimesis: Confucian Education for the Lesser, Women, and Children

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## Abstract

Core moral concepts in Confucianism, such as benevolence, righteousness, and faithfulness, are often so vague that in moral teachings one must rely on intuitive understanding aided by metaphor and etymology that illustrate them. In addition, case stories play a crucial role in clarifying these abstract moral concepts. Confucian ethics heavily depends on stories of wise men and exemplary figures who have been revered throughout Confucian history. In this paper, I will explore the role of examples in Confucian ethics, particularly within the context of moral education.

**Keywords:** Moral mimesis; Confucianism; Education; Examples

## Introduction: Confucian Ethics Binding the Family and the State Together

It is not an exaggeration to say that moral concerns, in a broad sense, are at the heart of Confucianism, both old and new. The order of Confucian society is governed by the concepts of *san gang wu lun* (三綱五倫, ‘three cardinal guides and five human relations’), with the core values of Confucian culture being *ren* (仁, humanity, benevolence) and *yi* (義, righteousness). The *san gang* defines the three fundamental relationships: between a ruler and subjects, between a father and son, and between a husband and wife, where the person in the socially higher position guides the one in the lower position. The *wu lun* specifies the values that govern the five basic human relationships, adding the relationships between friends and between the elderly and the young to the three mentioned in *san gang*. These values are righteousness (*yi*, 義), love (*qin*, 親), distinction (*bie*, 別), faithfulness (*xin*, 信), and order (*xu*, 序).

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However, many of these core Confucian concepts are often so vague that we must rely on intuitive understanding, aided by metaphor, etymology, and concrete cases that illustrate these concepts. For example, the core concept of *ren* (仁) is etymologically related to a budding rice embryo, suggesting the meanings of life (*sheng*, 生) and nurturing nature (*shengsheng zhizhi de*, 生生之德) in the Neo-Confucian context. In addition to etymology, case stories play a crucial role in clarifying these abstract moral concepts. Confucian ethics, as a form of normative ethics, heavily depends on stories of wise men (*sheng ren*, 聖人) and exemplary figures (*xian ren*, 賢人) who have been revered throughout Confucian history. In this paper, I will explore the role of examples in Confucian ethics, particularly within the context of moral education.

In Confucianism, moral norms are presented as prescriptions for human actions within the specific human relationships defined by *wu lun* (五倫, the five cardinal relationships). These norms outline the moral obligations and responsibilities to be fulfilled according to the social and familial roles of men and women. From an early age, every individual is aware of their position within the family and society, learning how to behave through cultural practices and everyday normative activities. Confucian ethics – whether interpreted as care ethics or virtue ethics or role ethics – relies heavily on an established family and social system that prioritizes patriarchy, respect for elders, and distinctions based on social status (身分), hierarchy, gender, and family lineage.

In traditional Confucian culture, where the family and the state function in concentric alignment, the boundaries between private and public life are often blurred and intertwined. This characteristic of Confucian culture lends a unique quality to the society, where the state intervenes directly in the personal moral life of individuals, and individuals, in turn, project their personal morality onto the state, effectively reducing the state to a moral entity rather than a political one. In Joseon Korea, personal moral matters such as divorce, marriage, and adultery were often brought before the Royal Court for deliberation. The family is considered a moral unit governed by the narrow ethics of father-son and husband-wife relationships and, more broadly, by the laws of rites (禮法). The state, shaped by family ethics and ritual laws, is also seen as a moral unit, upheld by the value of loyalty, modeled on filial piety and the chastity of widows. The relationship between the king and his subjects is likened to that between a father and his son (君師父一體). Similarly, the relationship between a king and a subject is paralleled with that between a husband and a wife. It is often said that a loyal subject does not serve two kings and a virtuous woman does not have two husbands (忠臣不事二君, 烈女不事二夫). This illustrates how the concept of the three cardinal guides forms the foundation of Confucian society.

Thus, educating the populace in the Confucian virtues of filial piety (孝), loyalty (忠), and chastity (貞) has been of paramount importance. These three moral virtues mutually reinforce each other as the fundamental pillars upholding a Confucian polity, except in rare cases where conflicts arise among them. In the following, I will focus on how these virtues were implemented and taught, especially among the common people during the Joseon period.

### ***Samgang Haengsildo* (三綱行實圖): A Confucian Moral Textbook Published by the State and Used for Over 400 Years in the Joseon Dynasty**

As previously mentioned, moral education in traditional Confucian society was not only aimed at cultivating virtuous individuals but also at ensuring the orderly management of the state. The structural logic underlying both the state and the family lent a political orientation to the teaching of Confucian ethics from the outset, reinforcing the strength of a Confucian state. Hence, it is no surprise that the Joseon Dynasty itself published a Confucian moral book titled *Samgang Haengsildo* (*An Illustrated Conduct of the Three Bonds*, 三綱行實圖, 1434), designed to educate the common people. The book contains stories of 105 individuals exemplifying the three cardinal virtues of filial piety, loyalty, and chastity, accompanied by illustrations to aid intuitive understanding. These stories draw from both Chinese and Korean sources, setting standards for virtuous behavior.

To instill abstract moral values, case stories and illustrations served as effective media. Tales about virtuous sons (and daughters-in-law) vividly demonstrate the qualities of a filial child. The first section of the book features stories where sons or daughters-in-law care for their parents or in-laws, who are often elderly, poor, ill, or helpless. Acts of care include providing nourishing food, nursing them through sickness, continuing to serve a mother-in-law after the husband's death, performing funeral rites with great respect, and maintaining deep sorrow even unto death. It is notable that in many stories, virtuous sons unexpectedly receive rewards for their good deeds, conveying the message that virtuous actions may lead to happiness.

The stories of loyal subjects, with few exceptions, typically depict individuals who are killed for their righteous actions, such as admonishing a king for his mistakes or refusing to serve another ruler. These tales emphasize the importance of loyalty, highlighting the unwavering commitment to a king and the principles of righteousness and faithfulness, even at the cost of one's life. In this context, there is no room for compromise; the natural instinct to preserve life is subordinated to the moral duty to uphold one's integrity and commitment to what is right (義, 道). This sense of moral obligation does not stem from external authority but arises internally, manifesting as emotional sincerity, loyalty to moral principles, and personal pride in being a true human being. Many of the stories conclude with the deaths of loyal subjects, as their sacrifice represents the ultimate expression of their dedication.

A similar theme of unwavering commitment, even at the risk of death, is found in the stories of virtuous women. The women in these stories preserve their chastity and loyalty at great personal cost. Extreme acts, such as cutting off a limb to demonstrate purity after being touched by a man outside of marriage, are celebrated as virtuous deeds. The determination to uphold moral principles and personal pride is often expressed through self-harming or even suicidal actions. It is also noteworthy that, in Confucian culture, individuals often resort to self-harm or suicide as a form of protest against injustice rather than directly confronting or eliminating the source of the threat.

*Samgang Haengsildo* was also translated into Korean in 1481 for lower-ranking men and women who could not read classical Chinese. It was later supplemented by *Yirun Haengsildo* (二倫行實圖, 1518), *Dongguk Shin Samgang Haengsildo* (東國新三綱行實圖, 1617), and *Orun Haengsildo* (五倫行實圖, 1797, 1859), reflecting the state's strong

determination to reinforce Confucian norms. These books followed the same format, combining stories and illustrations to effectively educate the common people. However, even in the education of the intellectual elite who could read classical Chinese, it was common for educational texts to include cases and examples to explain abstract moral concepts and principles. Because the vivid narratives and examples came from historical events, history (*Chunqiu*, 春秋) was considered crucial for teaching morals to future generations. By referring to past incidents and the deeds of sages (聖) and wise individuals (賢), moral education in Confucian culture was presented with concrete and detailed instructions, often articulated through the rules of propriety (禮).

For the upper class, Confucian classics (*Four Books and Three Classics*, 四書三經) were generally used for moral education. In the Joseon Dynasty, the Confucian scholar Yi I (1536–1584) created a book called *Gyukmong Yogyul* (擊蒙要訣, *Essentials for Cracking Ignorance*) aimed at educating young students. The book is divided into ten chapters covering topics such as setting life goals, breaking bad habits, maintaining one's mind and body, reading books, serving one's parents, performing funeral rites, practicing memorial rites, observing household manners, social interactions, and leading a proper social life. The moral instructions in the book are specific and contextual. For example, Yi I advises: 'If there is a wicked person in your village, do not speak ill of him publicly. Do not visit him, nor should you allow him to visit you. If you know him, simply greet him in passing without engaging in further conversation'<sup>1</sup> (Yi I 1988, 27, 擊蒙要訣, 接人 ['Meeting people']).

According to Yi I, learning the abstract value of benevolence (仁), a core Confucian virtue, is only possible when the learner frees themselves from selfish desires, which harm others and obstruct the natural order. To embody benevolence is to be kind, respectful, caring, loving, graceful, and generous. One should not seek personal gain by asking favors from government officials, regardless of whether the official is a friend or not. Visits to government offices should only be made when necessary. Even if the official is a friend, one should not visit frequently; if not a friend, one should visit even less. Under no circumstances should one make an improper request (若非義干請則當一切勿爲也) (ibid.).

In Confucian culture, intellectual inquiry (學問) and education are focused on shaping a well-rounded human being by mastering the five moral principles (五倫)<sup>2</sup> and understanding the human relations and social roles they define. Thus, the goal of learning is not found in distant, esoteric concepts but in adhering to the natural order of everyday life (皆於日用動靜之間 隨事各得其當而已)<sup>3</sup> (ibid., 立志 ['On purposefulness']). To learn proper behavior in daily life, following the sacred models of the past is most highly recommended. Yi I, echoing Mencius, believes that there is no

<sup>1</sup>鄉人之不善者 亦不可惡言揚其陋行 但待之泛然 不相往來 若前日相知者 則相見 只敘寒暄 則相見 只敘寒暄 不交他語'.

<sup>2</sup>人生斯世 非學問 無以爲人. 所謂學問者 亦非異常別件物事也 只是爲父當慈 爲子當孝 爲臣當忠 爲夫婦當別 爲兄弟當友 爲少者當敬長 爲朋友當有信' [One cannot become a man in this world without learning. What we call learning is not unusual, simply as a father, be kind; as a son, practice filial piety; as a minister, be loyal; as a husband and wife, respect your distinct roles; as a brother, be a friend; as a young man, be respectful of your elders; as a friend, be trustworthy] (Yi I 1988, 27, 擊蒙要訣, 序 ['Preface']).

<sup>3</sup>'It is all about doing things properly as you go through your day'.

fundamental difference between the original nature of a sage and that of an ordinary person (蓋衆人與聖人 其本性則一也)<sup>4</sup> (ibid.). By practicing what they truly know, individuals can cleanse their minds of old impurities and restore their original nature, thereby securing goodness (善). Yi I also notes that when Mencius teaches the goodness of the original nature, he often refers to the exemplary kings, Yao and Shun, who are considered paragons of moral perfection. Moral education encourages students to emulate these models by following the path they have walked. It is the duty of everyone to strive towards achieving moral perfection, which is seen as the ultimate goal of human life. This pursuit is a fundamental imperative of Confucian reasoning.

### Mimicking Models (Superiors and Sages) in Moral Education

In moral education, the use of model examples, anecdotes, and descriptive illustrations to demonstrate what it means to be a virtuous son or daughter-in-law can directly influence people by providing concrete guidance on how to act in similar situations. These examples and illustrations evoke the same emotions and moral sentiments in the audience as those represented in the stories. Typically, examples carry strong moral messages that reflect the value perspectives of those who present them. In the case of *Samganghaengsildo*, as an official moral textbook, it inevitably contains an ideological element supporting a patriarchal system. However, when sharing anecdotes or episodes, these ideological aspects often remain hidden behind the concrete depictions of human activities (Figure 1). The voice of the author becomes less apparent when the story or illustration asserts itself with an authoritative tone. The author, implicitly or explicitly, urges the reader to behave similarly in comparable situations, even to the extent of mimicking actions such as maintaining chastity or demonstrating loyalty unto death (Figure 2).

Imitating the behaviors of sacred figures in the Confucian tradition has been highly recommended. This imitation is not only about replicating behavior in specific situations but also involves preserving the teachings passed down from ancient sages like Yao and Shun, as highlighted in *Chung-yung* (中庸). Internalizing the teachings of sacred and wise figures lies at the heart of Confucian learning, where such teachings ultimately boil down to exhortations for moral action. In this context, I refer to this imitative behavior as ‘moral mimesis’. Moral mimesis relies on the human capacity for action to convey moral qualities, which then become the focus of imitation. It requires both analogical thinking, which allows one to relate their own experiences to those of a model figure, and moral imagination, which involves putting oneself in the scenario depicted in the story and envisioning how one might act in a similar situation. This capacity for analogical thinking and imagination is developed through the repetitive teaching of moral episodes accumulated over a long history. Consequently, empathy and sympathy are essential moral abilities cultivated within the everyday practices of Confucian culture.

Plato, who first introduced the concept of mimesis in the context of artistic representation, distinguishes between two types of mimicry in the *Sophist*: sincere mimicry and insincere mimicry.

<sup>4</sup>‘Men and saints have the same nature’.

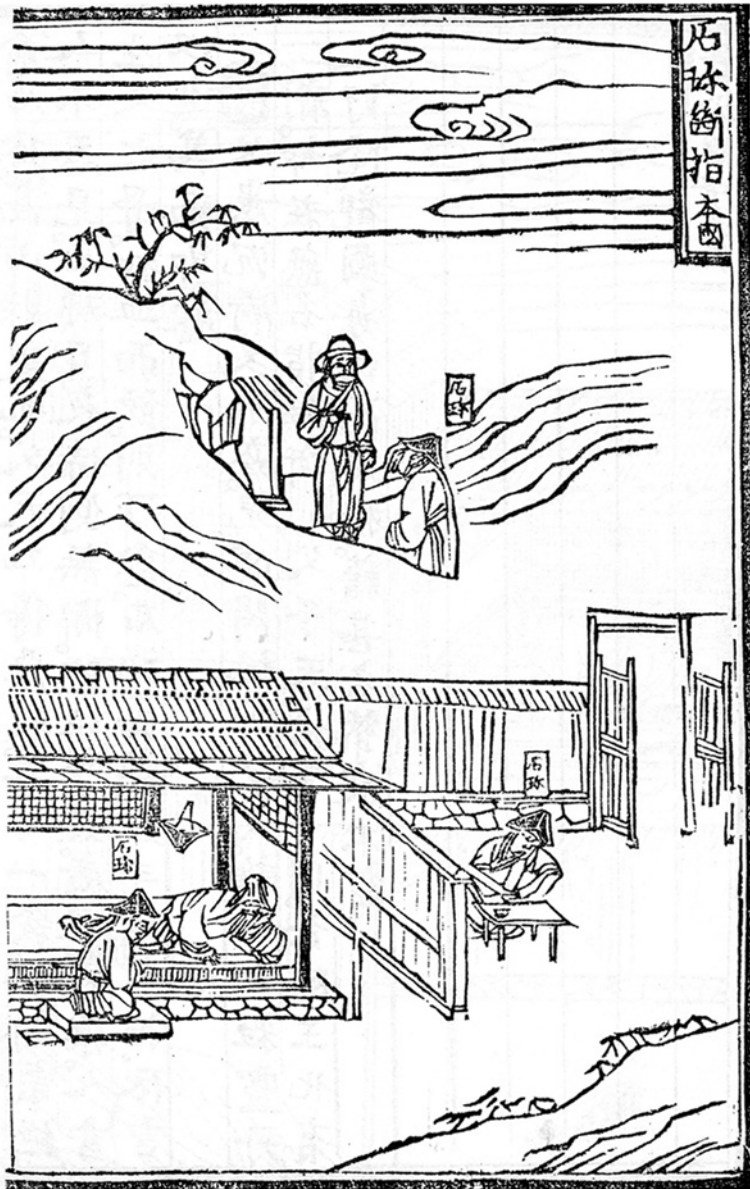


Figure 1. A picture from *Samgangaengsildo* depicting the virtue of filial piety: Following advice that bone and blood from a living body could heal a sick father, a son cuts his own finger to save his father.

Stranger: Some mimics know the thing they are impersonating; others do not. And could we find a more important distinction than that of knowing from not knowing?





Figure 2. A picture from depicting the virtue of chastity: It shows a woman whose arms and legs are severed by Japanese soldiers as a result of her resistance to their attempts to rape her.

Theaetetus: No.

Stranger: And the mimicry we have just mentioned goes with knowledge, for to impersonate you, one must be acquainted with you and your traits.

Theaetetus: Of course.

Stranger: And what of the traits of justice and of virtue generally? Are there not many who, having no knowledge of virtue but only some sort of opinion about it, zealously set about making it appear that they embody virtue as they conceive it, mimicking it as effectively as they can in their words and actions?

Theaetetus: Only too many.

...

Stranger: We must, then, distinguish the ignorant mimic from the other, who has knowledge.

...

Stranger: ... for purposes of distinction let us call mimicry guided by opinion 'conceit mimicry', and the sort that is guided by knowledge 'mimicry by acquaintance'. (Plato 1961: 1015-16 [267b-e])

Mimicking virtuous behavior without understanding the underlying traits of virtue reduces people to a state of ignorance, making them unaware of their actions rather than turning them into true moral agents. Thus, Confucian education by example, as seen in *Samgangaengsildo*, may be effective at an elementary level, particularly for children and those of limited intellectual capacity. Repetitive mimicry can help form habits that appear moral on the surface. However, genuine moral education should aim to develop moral subjects who can act according to their own will and motivations. Such individuals should be capable of making moral judgments based on personal choices, with a clear understanding of what is moral and virtuous.

A person must transcend mere imitation of a superior figure or the fulfillment of social roles such as being a good son, a virtuous daughter-in-law, or a good mother, to become a moral subject who can navigate new situations encountered throughout life, beyond the predefined 'Five Relations' (五倫) of Confucian society. To be a true moral subject is to imitate with knowledge – understanding what to mimic, what is at stake in the act of imitation, and the moral significance of the action itself. Blind mimicry is simply copying others' actions as an ideological reflex, whereas informed mimicry (mimicry by acquaintance) involves grasping the broader validity of the moral values inherent in the actions being emulated.

With this understanding, a moral agent connects with the model person to form a moral community that embodies universal values such as filial piety. For example, a son who imitates, with knowledge, the behaviors of King Shun or other virtuous figures in Confucian culture may be seen as embodying the qualities of sincerity (誠) and enlightenment (明), as described in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Chungyung, 中庸). However, most importantly, imitation guided by knowledge must help us recognize the ultimate moral goal: achieving balance (equilibrium), harmony, and alignment with the natural order, thereby forming a unity with Heaven and Earth. In the following section, I will explore the metaphysical aspects of moral education in Confucianism and the role of models within it.



### The Metaphysical Aspect of Moral Education and the Role of Models

In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, it is suggested that the ultimate aim of moral education is to cultivate the Way (道), which is defined as living in accordance with the nature imparted to us by Heaven or Nature<sup>5</sup>. The text states,

The Way cannot be separated from us for a moment ... Therefore the superior man is watchful over himself when he is alone.

Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused it is called equilibrium (*chung*, centrality, mean). When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish. (*The Doctrine of the Mean*, 1, in Chan [1963: 98])

Heaven, Earth, and humans together form a complete whole, constituting the universe. Achieving humanity is an obligation for humans, not only for their own perfection and well-being but also for the fulfillment of the universe as a whole. A distinctive feature of Confucianism emerges when humanity is defined through human relationships and relational virtues such as filial piety. The perfection of humanity is attained by cultivating sincerity and an utterly truthful mind (誠) in human relations. The perfection of the self through sincerity in these relationships naturally leads to the perfection of others. In Confucian ethics, the perfection of the self is inseparable from the perfection of others because moral actions are always mediated through interactions with others. When the nature of humans is fully realized in moral actions, it aligns with the order of Heaven and Earth.

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (ibid., 22, in Chan [1963: 107-108])<sup>6</sup>

Morality in Confucian culture is not merely a matter of following norms; it is deeply connected to the ontological dimension of human existence. However, this metaphysical aspect is not presented abstractly but is revealed in the context of actual human

<sup>5</sup>‘天命之謂性 率性之謂道 脩道之謂教’ [What Heaven (T'ien, Nature) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (Tao). Cultivating the Way is called education], *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 1, in Chan (1963: 98).

<sup>6</sup>Also refer to sec. 25: ‘Sincerity is the beginning and end of things. Without sincerity there would be nothing [...] Sincerity is not only the completion of one’s own self, it is that by which all things are completed’ (ibid.).

lives, embodied through the virtuous actions of sages who serve as living examples of the Way – the absolute moral standard. These sages are often equated with Heaven. As stated,

‘The Mandate of Heaven, how beautiful and unceasing’ ... this is what makes Heaven to be Heaven ... ‘How shining is it, the purity of King Wen’s virtue!’ ... this is what made King Wen what he was. Purity likewise is unceasing. (ibid., 26 [Chan 1963: 109–110])

Yao, Shun, Yü, T’ang, Wen, Wu, and Duke Chou are regarded as Confucian sages. Confucius praised King Wen and Duke Chou for their exemplary filial piety. The *Doctrine of the Mean* (Chung-yung) states, ‘Men of filial piety are those who skillfully carry out the wishes of their forefathers and skillfully carry forward their undertakings’ (ibid., 19 [Chan 1963: 103]). Confucius also remarked, ‘Shun was indeed greatly filial! In virtue, he was a sage; in honor, he was the Son of Heaven ...’ (ibid., 17 [Chan 1963: 102]). He ‘transmitted the ancient traditions of Yao and Shun, and he modeled after and made brilliant the systems of King Wen and King Wu’ (ibid., 30 [Chan 1963: 111]).

Confucian sages are depicted as possessing the following qualities of character.

... quickness of apprehension, intelligence, insight, and wisdom, which enable him to rule all men; magnanimity, generosity, benignity, and tenderness, which enable him to embrace all men; vigor, strength, firmness, and resolution, which enable him to maintain a firm hold; orderliness, seriousness, adherence to the Mean, and correctness, which enable him to be reverent; pattern, order, refinement, and penetration, which enable him to exercise discrimination. All embracing and extensive, and deep and unceasingly springing, these virtues come forth at all times<sup>7</sup>. (ibid., 31 [Chan 1963: 112])

To educate is to cultivate the Way as manifested in the lives of sages. Cultivating the Way involves following and imitating the exemplary lives of these sages. The goal is to attain the Way and be sincere in performing what is appropriate to one’s role, adhering to the rules of propriety. One must ‘study it (the Way to be sincere) extensively, inquire into it accurately, think over it carefully, sift it clearly, and practice it earnestly’<sup>8</sup> (ibid., 20 [Chan 1963: 107]). However, the emphasis on study and a keen mind converges on understanding what to do within one’s specific social role and concrete life circumstances. Thus, the superior person acts according to what is proper for their position and does not seek to go beyond it. ‘He does not complain against Heaven above or blame men below. Thus it is that the superior man lives peacefully and at ease and waits for his destiny (*ming*, Mandate of Heaven, fate)’ (ibid., 14 [Chan 1963: 101–102]). To be human in Confucian culture is to understand one’s identity in the context of social relations (名分) and recognize what is appropriate to do (命).

<sup>7</sup> 爲能聰明睿知 足以有 臨也 寬裕溫柔 足以有容也 發強剛毅 足以有執也 齊莊中正 足以有敬也 文理密察 足以有別也’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘博學之, 審問之, 慎思之, 篤行之’.

### The Aftermath of Moral Mimesis

Promoting exemplary individuals or conduct is a typical method of moral education in a Confucian context. These examples can provide guidance on what actions to take in similar situations and what moral goals to pursue. Confucian texts are replete with concrete moral instructions on serving the king, honoring parents, and governing the people. Learning through examples can help develop analogical thinking based on intuitive recognition of similarities and also foster moral imagination. By immersing in the emotions portrayed, people can cultivate empathy and sympathy.

However, strictly following moral models can hinder people from advancing to a higher level of abstract moral reasoning about what is truly good. To become a moral subject involves more than simply following the path of the sages and fulfilling one's prescribed role. The goal of moral education should be to cultivate a moral subject who can critically evaluate the choices of sages and fully understand what is at stake when making moral decisions. A moral subject must be capable of making decisions independently and responsibly in new situations that the sages might never have encountered.

This aspect of moral education is particularly significant for women, as Confucian sages were exclusively male, leaving women without appropriate models to follow. In the Confucian tradition, it was common for men to write educational texts specifically for women, known as 'inner teachings' (內訓), which aimed to instruct women on proper conduct, virtues, and domestic responsibilities. These detailed guidelines on women's domestic duties often prevented women from developing into autonomous moral subjects capable of independent moral reasoning.

Instead of modeling themselves after sages, women were expected to follow the lives of virtuous women who devoted themselves to serving their husbands and in-laws. Biographies of exemplary women were published to educate women on proper behavior. However, moral mimesis, whether rooted in ignorant imitation or imitation with understanding, has its limitations as a method of moral education because it heavily relies on historical examples of behavior. Women confined to predefined roles had limited opportunities to realize their full potential or exercise their imagination to shape their own lives.

Morality concerns what a person ought to do to become a true human being, which goes beyond merely fulfilling a prescribed social role and its associated responsibilities. Although moral mimesis in the Confucian tradition has contributed to the stability and continuity of a seemingly moral society, it also suppresses moral thinking and reasoning, reinforcing the status quo.

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