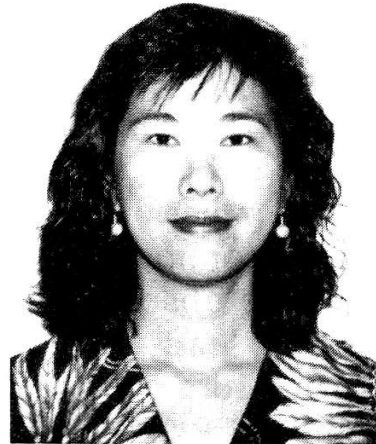


## *Chinese Women in the Family: A Confucian Perspective*

by Eva Man Kit-wah

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Traditional China was an agrarian society governed by an imperial bureaucracy. And while Taoist, Buddhist, and other schools of thought had an influence on its conventional Confucian culture, none presented much of a challenge to the central Confucian idea of family; nor to the authoritative role this concept was to play in the development of China's moral and ethical structures.<sup>1</sup>



To understand the role of women in Confucian society, we need first to look at the Confucian concept of *li*. *Li* may be translated as 'rite', but, more specifically, it refers to the sum and substance of all the rituals that have been set down to legislate religious and secular decorum and proper social behaviour. It is precisely here that the ubiquitous constraints exerted by Confucian tradition on Chinese women both in and outside the family are most evident.

*Li* is basic to the Chinese feudal family. Actually, to comprehend what traditional values Chinese women fell heir to, and how their roles were modified by changing family structures, one would have to examine the *li* and its relationship to Chinese society down through the ages. In this paper, however, I have chosen to focus on only two of its many aspects, i.e. its philosophical and socio-political dimensions.

Philosophically, the concept of *li* or 'ritual' is related to the concept of *yi* or 'righteousness'. In Confucius' *Analects* (*Lun Yu*) we read: "Morality is a fundamental characteristic

of the gentleman (*jun-zi*) and is practised by observing *li*." The core concept of Confucian morality is, then, ethical order, an order based on *yi* which means 'righteousness' or 'correct relationship'. The order which finds its expression in social ritual, however, is never static, but changes constantly in accordance with the variety of concrete situations found within a myriad of social institutions. Yet, it is these very situations and their institutionalization, reinforced by a feudal society, which have made the rites play such a central role in the development of so many social constraints on the freedom of Chinese women throughout the centuries.

According to Confucianists, the practise of ritual can awaken a person's moral consciousness and reinforce a certain mode of behaviour. For example, through observing the rules and order of social ritual, women are thus reminded of their role in the family and their humble place in society. This may be acceptable as part of a general theory where each member of society is urged to play a self-sacrificing role for the common good and to promote social harmony, but when we observe how this rule is practiced in particular cases, it leads one to question whether Confucius himself demanded a greater degree of humility from women than from men.

### Confucius and the Inferior Status of Women

The question of whether Confucianism has legislated a specific and concrete norm for women in society is of paramount importance here. When the original writings are brought to bear on this issue, discussion usually gets bogged down in controversy. The quote most often cited is from the *Analects*: "In one's own household, it is the women and the *xiao ren* (literally, 'the little men') that are the most difficult to deal with" (*Analects*, xvii: 25). Is Confucius here speaking of women in general or of a particular type or class of women? Neo-Confucians argue the latter is true, since women are consistently given equal status with men elsewhere in the *Analects*. They argue further that by coupling 'women' with '*xiao ren*'...a specialized and derogatory term used to describe persons who are 'common', 'base' or 'ignoble'... Confucius refers to a particular class of women, i.e. the

frivolous ladies of the court who pass their time in the company of banal and inane officials. Such women, generally speaking, are indeed proverbially arrogant, demanding and full of complaints, which makes them "most difficult to deal with". As one prominent Neo-Confucian puts it: "We must not take this particular saying of Confucius literally as indicating the Sage's view of women in general." <sup>2</sup>

Neo-Confucians are also quick to add that we would be wrong to hold Confucius responsible for such ancient practises as foot binding and excluding women from schools of formal education. These practises came later, long after Confucius' time, and there is no mention or inference of their existence in the original Confucian literature. On the contrary, Confucius has already stated his opinion quite clearly that education should be open to one and all, regardless of sex or social status.

If, then, we are not able to find in the original writings of Confucius our answer to the question of how traditional Chinese attitudes towards women came to be, perhaps we ought to take a closer look at China's social structures, and, in particular, how they developed in response to the need for more changes and more controls to maintain social stability in an empire undergoing rapid expansion.

### **From Matriarchal to Patriarchal**

Research into the differences between the ancient Yangshao and Lungshan cultures demonstrates the important role that women played in what was, in effect, a matriarchal society. Not only were women the artisans and craftsmen of society, but they were also the managers and engineers of its trading and commerce systems as well. The men, by and large, occupied themselves with hunting and fishing. Women are also credited at a later date with the invention of the art of agriculture, which brought about the single most important change in the economic structure in the history of China. But as society changed and other forms of endeavour such as metal work gained prominence, there also took place a shift in the division of labour, one based solely on physical capability. Thus women were superceded by men, who began to play a more dominant role in society. This in time brought

about a change from the old matriarchal to a new patriarchal form of society.<sup>3</sup>

The patriarch, usually the oldest male of the extended family, became its production head, organizing the family's work life and supervising all its economic activities. It must be kept in mind that in traditional China there were no sharp distinctions between economic, moral and political activity.<sup>4</sup> The primary goal of the patriarch was to insure that the land was passed down to the next generation, thus guaranteeing that ancestral property would remain within the family in perpetuity. The patrilineal system underlined the importance of producing male heirs, which, in turn, only served to increased female servitude and the subjection of women to men in society. In time, it came to be an accepted legal inference that the man exercised exclusive ownership rights over his wife and children. Another result of emphasis on the importance of lineal blood lines was that concubinage came to be officially condoned and socially sanctioned, with the man taking as many conbunes as he could afford while the woman, of course, had to remain forever faithful to the one man.

While the patriarchal system is hardly unique to China, and can be found to exist in similar patterns within other agrarian civilizations, what Confucians did that was decidedly different was to make the family unit a socio-political model to serve as a microcosm of the well-ordered state. This raised the family social structure to cosmic proportions.<sup>5</sup> The well-ordered family was the key to the well-ordered state, and both were to be founded on the practise of filial piety.

The legacy of social constraints which women in feudalistic China fell heir to can also be traced back to Confucian teaching on the five cardinal relationships of society: ruler to minister, father to son, husband to wife, the elder to his younger brothers, and friend to friend. These relationships not only governed the state but the family as well. Special attention should be given to the first three in so far as they are directly related to the role of women both in the family and in society.

## Norms of Behaviour for Chinese Women

In the writings of Mencius, a Confucian disciple, and perhaps the Sage's most important and influential interpreter, we find the emphasis is on the differences between husbands and wives. According to Mencius:

It is prescribed by the *li* that in giving and receiving, the man and the woman are not to come into physical contact with each other.

When a young girl marries, her mother is to accompany her to the gate giving her advice and cautioning her in the following or similar words: "When you arrive in your new home you must comport yourself with respect and decorum. You are never to disobey your husband." The manner of a wife and concubine is to consider obedience and docility to be the only proper norm for her behaviour (IDA:17).

Such sayings as the above were used to justify any social constraints placed on the behaviour of Chinese women. But this is not the whole story. Special note must also be given to the following except from the writings of Mencius. When asked should a man stretch out his hand to help a sister-in-law who is drowning, he replied that not to reach out to her must be considered the act not of a man but of a brute animal (IDA:17).

This clearly indicates that both Confucius and Mencius stress a sense of righteousness that must govern relationships between men and women, one which transcends the dictates established by the *li*. We shall see how later interpretations of *li* came to distort the original spirit of this teaching.

During the period of the Warring States, the well-known legalist philosopher and politician Han Fei stressed the first three of the primary relationships and defined them in terms of service: the minister owes service to the ruler, the son is to serve his father, and the wife her husband.

In the Han Dynasty, the teachings of Tung Chung-shu raised these three primary relationships to a metaphysical level, which only added weight to the arguments for the need to maintain moral constraints which were already proving to be such a burden to women. Tung's thinking was greatly influenced by Taoist cosmology. According to Tung, the husband is *yang* and the wife is *yin*. Accordingly, since *Yin* is

not an independent entity, it can achieve nothing of itself but only acts as a substitute for or a deputy of the *yang*.

In traditional China, women were not allowed to own property. This rule is recorded along with many other regulations governing family relations in the book *Li Chi*, a compendium of rites and rituals written during the Western Han period. *Li Chi* considers the father and son relationship to be of primary importance. Here, the son must give up his wife if his parents don't like her. Among the many moral requirements of women, which are delineated in great detail, the *Li Chi* enumerates the 'three obediences' and the 'four virtues'. According to *Li Chi*, a woman was to be obedient to her father in her youth, to her husband in her marriage, and to her son in her widowhood. Thus was the Chinese woman historically subjugated to three masculine relationships and completely dependent on them for social status and economic survival throughout the whole of her lifetime. Three months before she got married, a woman was also to be instructed in the 'four feminine virtues', i.e. moral rectitude, proper conversation, appearance and deportment, and woman's work.

Women were also excluded from public life and formal education. One of the later Han Confucianists, Yang Chun, is quoted as saying that if women were entrusted with tasks outside the home, it would cause disorder and confusion throughout the empire..."a clever woman is able to overthrow the state".

In former times, a woman lived only to serve her husband and his parents. There are two stories from the Chinese classics that date from the Han dynasty which have come down to us as examples of how women were to comport themselves. The first is about a woman named Man Kwong whose husband did not speak a word to her for the first seven days of their marriage. In silence she knelt before him until she finally learned that he did not approve of the fine clothes she was wearing nor of the way she offered him his tea to drink and his food to eat. She changed back into the old rags she used to wear and, daring not to look into his eyes, made sure to raise his food-tray to the level of her eyebrows while serving him on her knees. The second example for young wives is the story of Madame Poon who ran seven miles every day to fetch water from a spring because her mother-in-law

did not like the taste of well-water. One day she was delayed by a fierce thunderstorm and arrived home a few minutes late. This enraged her mother-in-law who drove her out of the house. Yet Madame Poon stayed in the neighbourhood, knitting clothes for her livelihood. Good daughter-in-law that she was, she continued to buy good food and prepare it for her mother-in-law to eat. The villagers praised her for her high virtue and as a result her husband was appointed a public official in the town.

After the Han dynasty fell, China entered a period of great disorder and civil strife called the "Era of the Six Dynasties". Intellectuals lost faith in Confucianism and abandoned its precepts and tenets including the practise of its rites and rituals. They turned instead to Taoist thought. This brought about a new liberalization in the relationship between men and women. A wife was no longer required by the demands of *li* to submit to her husband when his demands did not conform to righteousness and correct behaviour.

When the Tang dynasty reunited China, the family unit once again became the basis for a well-ordered society, and its ritualization and standardization of family life throughout China promoted national stability. The now standardized family rites and rituals, especially those having to do with women within the family, were propagated through such popular writings as *The Book of Women's Piety* and *Women's Analects*. An example of their content may be found in the following excerpt from *Women's Analects* from a chapter entitled "Serving Parents":

A woman must respect her parents; greet them daily; prepare a fire for them in winter; cool them with a fan in summer; serve meals to them when they are hungry; serve them soup whenever they are thirsty. Women must not get upset when they are scolded, but should listen to and reflect on what is being said that they might learn to correct themselves.

Later, the moral conduct outlined in *Li Chi* was appropriated by such intellectuals as the historian Zema Kwong and the philosopher Chu Hsi and given a newer and more elaborate form to fit contemporary social needs. In Zema Kwong's *Family Norms*, he says that in the relationships of father to son and husband to wife, the son and wife are to be

considered as those to be ruled. In Chu Hsi's *Family Rites*, women are exhorted to read such popular books as *Biographies of Chinese Women* containing good and bad models for female conduct, and *Women's Commandments* which lists in details the proper daily work for women from cock crow to sundown. Chu Hsi is also well known for his emphasis on the chastity of widows, his most often quoted saying being: "It is proper for a woman to die of hunger but not to lose her chastity."

From the Sung to the early Ching dynasty, the chastity of widows was promoted widely, and among all the feminine virtues mentioned in Confucianism, the noblest was considered to be fidelity to the memory of the dead husband. Commemorative columns were erected in the names of chaste widows after they died, on which were carved their life stories. Here is a classic story taken from *Biographies of Women, Ching History*, and told as an example of a woman's fidelity to her dead spouse. Chun Fu-man was betrothed to a certain gentleman by her parents. When she was eighteen years old and before they were married, her fiance passed away. Her parents wanted to marry her off to someone else. But hearing of this and that the matchmaker was on her way to the home to arrange this second marriage, she went and cut off her left ear. Three days later, she cut off her remaining ear and then went to the home of the family of her dead fiance. There after performing the remaining funeral rites, she went out and committed suicide.

As Confucian moral teaching became institutionalized, it developed in a direction quite opposite to the spirit of its original intent. Confucius aimed at actualizing human freedom and ethical values through the exercise of a self-governing and moral will. Subsequent ritualization and institutionalization of Confucian morality are better seen not as exemplifying Confucius' original teaching, but rather as the expressions of the politics of feudalism and its accompanying patriarchal systems. From the point of view of contemporary critical theorists, these rites and rituals were not the real thing but like figures in disguise and, as such, unconsciously adopted as moral imperatives supposedly founded on Confucian metaphysical and cosmological beliefs.

## Chinese Women in a Changing Society

While the feudal society along with its ideology may no longer exist, Chinese women today still remain under the influence of certain traditional concepts of the Confucian woman, albeit to a lesser degree. We are still expected to be submissive to the male members of our families and to make the role of wife and mother our first priority. However, because we live in an highly commercial capitalistic city and are trained and educated to compete with other men and women in order to achieve a better standard of living for our families, we are also expected to be self-sufficient, independent and contribute to the welfare of society. It is no longer seen as virtuous for a woman to be uneducated and subordinate. Most women in Hong Kong are leading lives where double standards place burdens and demands that in the long run result in fragmented personalities from having to lead double lives.

In the past, Chinese women were given no choices. They were not trained to act independently, nor could they inherit property, and even their names went unlisted in the records of their family genealogies. Two thousand years of subjugation, of enforced docility and self-denigration have left the traditional Chinese woman without the ability, motivation or opportunity for self-liberation. Compared with them, we women of today have far more opportunities and are far more self-aware; and yet, perhaps because of this, we are in fact more frustrated than our predecessors. We are constantly faced with conflicting social roles and disparate images of what kind of a person a 'good woman' is supposed to be.

When one of his disciples asked Confucius the meaning of *ren* ( or 'benevolence'), his answer was quite simple: "If it leads to a feeling of well-being, then do it." It seems unlikely that a Chinese woman in contemporary Hong Kong, caught as she is between the weight of Confucian tradition and the call of modern culture to greater freedom and liberation, would be able to grasp the meaning of what a feeling of well-being might mean for her in simple terms and in a direct way.

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## Notes

1. Stacey, J. *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983) pp. 17, 59.
2. Ts'ai Jen-hou, *Ju-chia hsi-hsiang-ti-hsien-tai-hua*, (The Modern Meaning of Confucian Thought), Taipei: Wen-tsin Publishing House, 1987.
3. Op. cit. Stacey, p. 23.
4. Ibid., p. 27.
5. Ibid., p. 30.
6. Ibid., p. 38.

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## *A Woman's Prayer*

Loving God, accept and bless our desire to be  
women of the Church:

women of prayer and praise  
as was Sarah,

women of faith and fidelity  
as was Ruth,

women of determination and power  
as was Esther,

women of courage, aware and concerned  
with the needs of the world as was Judith

women of generosity and obedience to your Word  
as was Mary.

To the One whose power at work in us can do immeasurably  
more than we could ask or imagine be glory  
in the Church  
and in Christ Jesus  
through all generations  
world without end. Amen.