

CONFUCIANISM AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

by Sun Ai Lee Park

Introduction

Confucius was born in 552 B.C.¹ when feudal societies were forming in China. Obviously he saw an urgent need to establish law and order between people and the nations. He made an effort to develop a system to rule and bring order between human beings and the nations. He taught how to rule oneself, the family, the nations and heaven and earth.

With this teaching and some of his disciples, he travelled to different feudal kingdoms, hoping that they might use him in their government. Without much success he decided to teach his disciples, 72 members at one time, but the overall total was 3000. The members increased later on and Confucianism spread in every direction.²

His teaching has been the foundation of 2000 years of political and ethical principles throughout Chinese history. Other countries in north-east Asia such as Korea and Japan were also deeply influenced by it later on. Confucius was a northerner, whereas Lao-tzu the founder of Taoism came from the south. Confucianism represents aggressive, outgoing, formalistic law and order. It typifies the male culture of hunters and male gods in heaven, while Taoism represents female culture of agrarian gods and the mother-earth religion.³

Confucian Cosmology

According to Confucian cosmology, heaven, earth and humans are intimately linked and humans are to learn from heaven and earth. Firstly, heaven and earth were life-giving, continually bringing new life and naturally relational. Nothing is isolated.

Confucius was impressed by the cosmic order which keeps connected positions for each part in relating to the whole.

Desirous of establishing the same order, the harmony in the human community from the family up to the State, Confucians attempted to choreograph Ritual which includes not only religious activities associated with coming-of-age ceremonies,

¹ Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of World Religions*, p. 343

² Jack Finegan, *op. cit.*, p. 346

³ Choi Soo Bing, *The Issues of Women's Liberation in the light of Leo-tzu Thought* (Seoul: Su Kong University, 1992), pp. 2022

*weddings, funerals and ancestor worship, but also comportment and good manners. The classical ritual texts are filled with directions on the correct and proper behaviour for every conceivable human interaction.*⁴

In the cosmic order there are Yang and Yin elements. Masculine is Yang and Feminine is Yin.

From this cosmic pattern it was deduced that the position of women in the human order should be lowly and inferior like the earth, and that the proper behaviour for a woman was to be yielding and weak, passive and still, like the earth. It was left for men to be active and strong, to be initiators like Heaven. Though men were considered superior, they could not do without women as their complementary opposites.

*In the human order, women were seen only in the context of the family, while men were seen in the wider social political order.*⁵

Education for girls was to prepare them to be wives and mothers. Boys were to learn history and the classics. Girls were confined to women's quarters and learned good manners and domestic skill. At age 15, girls would receive a hairpin in a coming-of-age ceremony. At 20 they were to marry. Three months before her wedding, she was to be instructed in the four aspects of womanly character: virtue, speech, comportment and work.

These and others were kept religiously by the classic and more so in the neo-classic Confucianism. In modern days many things have changed.

Ancestor worship in Confucianism is said to have originated from thankfulness toward life and those who gave life to them and grand and great-grandparents' generations back who continued the lifeline for them.

Ideology of Jen

Rev. Wu Fu Ya of Taiwan who presented a paper in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where we had the second "Interfaith Dialogue from Asian Women's Perspectives" talked about "Confucianism and Women in Taiwan" and a part of her paper was a summary of the ideology of Jen.

The Chinese character for Jen is composed of two elements, human and two. The implication is that human beings are to be in relationship. The term may be translated as "benevolence", "humanness", "humility", "love" or even "virtue".⁶

1. Universality - Jen is love for all people and all things without discrimination or partiality.
2. Permanence - Jen is the Two of Heaven and Earth. Therefore existing all the time.

⁴ Theresa Kelleher, "Confucianism" in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York, 1987), p. 139

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.140

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.138

3. Creativity - Jen is the life in the sense that it is the seed which produced life. The Book of Change says, "The greatest virtue of Heaven and Earth is to produce".
4. Sensitivity - Jen being the opposite of numbness is the capacity to respond to stimuli. It is sensitivity.
5. Flexibility - Chu Hsi said, Jen is soft in "appearance but very firm when in action." Confucius said, "A man who is firm, persevering and reserved is approaching the standard of Jen."
6. Protectiveness - Jen is love for all people and all things. It disapproves of war. It disapproves of extravagance.⁷

One of the descriptions of Jen given by Confucius is as follows:

Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge others by what is right in ourselves: this may be called the art of virtue⁸ (Analects 6:28).

If this principle could have been applied to everybody, particularly inclusive of women. we should have nothing to say but to follow, but we have seen already in the foundation of Confucianism in cosmology, women are differentiated from men. Perhaps as Taoists claim, there was no discrimination between Yin and Yang. Nevertheless in the Confucian interpretation of the terms from the beginning, especially towards neo-Confucian era onwards serious discrimination against women who are Yin grew so much that we can call it violence. In the patriarchal androcentrism a really gentlemanly statement can be turned into a naked sexism.

Confucian View of Women

Propriety in Confucianism is a very important thing, proper dress for a particular occasion, the proper word for a particular occasion, a proper way of saying it, proper way of entertaining people and so on.

Among all proper ways of being woman is a question of honour or great shame for the whole family. Therefore it was specifically regulated and widely taught. The fundamental Confucian view is that women are not equal to men. Woman's role is to produce a male heir to her husband's family, and looking after not only her own children but also the family servants and dogs and chicken. In fact, her role is more complicated and different than that of a man's. However her achievements are only within the boundary of the extended family. Confucians viewed family relations as basic to other larger human social relationships, that the woman's way is important and every woman must fulfill the heavenly-given tasks. In order to do this the following detailed instructions were given:

1. Three Obedience

⁷ Wu Fu Ya, "Confucianism and women in Taiwan" paper presented at an Inter-faith Conference from Asian Women's Perspective at Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1991

⁸ Theresa Kelleher, op. cit., p. 138

As a child a woman should obey her father, as a married woman her husband, and as a widow her son. There is always a man whom a woman should obey in her life. Never independent, never making an important decision herself. In cosmology a woman is lowly and subservient like earth, she should not break out of it.

2. Five Cardinal Relationships

Rulers and subject, father and sons, husband and wife, older siblings and younger ones, the person in the first category should bestow Jen to the second but the persons of second category have to keep all the rules and order in every detail.

3. Seven Evil Grounds for Divorce

Marriage was a sacred event, registered in the cosmic order and with the ancestral line, which could not be broken. However if a wife commits one of the seven evils, she should be sent back to her native home (a great dishonour). The seven grounds for divorce were: disobedience to husband's parents, failure to bear a male child, promiscuity, jealousy, having an incurable disease, talking too much and stealing.⁹

4. Chastity for Women

For woman to guard her chastity meant more than guarding her personal integrity. They used the term chastity with wider sense than the narrow one of sexual continence, embracing a more general sense of interiority of honour.¹⁰

When the Han dynasty fell in 220 B.C. Confucianism was weakened by Buddhism and Taoism. It could not play an important role until it re-emerged in the form of neo-Confucianism in Song dynasty (960-1279 A.D.). When it re-emerged, great oppression towards women was practised.

Neo-Confucianism made a deep analysis of the two rising religions. It criticised Buddhism for its unrealistic aspect, because Buddhists were escaping reality to achieve religiosity. For the pragmatic mind of Confucians, it was impossible to think of. However, they were impressed by Buddhists' deep reflections of human interiority and religious practices such as meditation. Confucianists also responded in this area. But they were aware of the dangers of one-sided emphasis on internality by Taoism.

Hence the moral code for women. "in many ways a continuation of the earlier, classical one, focussed to an almost obsessive degree on chastity." "And within this, the chastity of widows was singled out for special emphasis."¹¹ The neo-Confucianism brought the chastity call for women more into the public arena.

For example, the first Ming emperor Tee-tsu announced that chaste widows who lost their husbands before they had reached the age of 30 and who remained

⁹ Ibid., p. 143

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 152

¹¹ Ibid., p. 155

*chaste until the age of 50 would have a memorial arch built in their honour, and their household would be exempt from corvee labour.*¹²

In this neo-Confucianism movement women scholars joined and have written text-books for women. Women instructing women in the Confucian way, and the discrimination and oppressive aspects of the religion for women were accepted with gratefulness and greater sense of discipline, and they became more ardent and devoted Confucians than the men.

After the revolution women and men have taken critical evaluation of the teaching and it goes on.

5. Work of Pan Chao

It is important to mention Pan Chao (?-116 A.D.) of the Han dynasty. She was the first woman instructor of Confucianism to women. During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) Confucianism was made State orthodoxy and there was a conscious effort to bring women into the mainstream of the tradition. Pan Chao then was an instructor for women in the palace and wrote a book *Instruction for Women*. In the early part of the book, she has written the text out of the concern that the unmarried women of her family (her daughters and nieces) were unprepared for their future vocation as wives."¹³

The instruction meant that she should be low, subservient, like the earth, humbling herself before others: the second is that she should work hard and be diligent in domestic work, and the third is that she should enter totally into a wife's responsibilities towards other members of her husband's family.

She instructs that husband and wife should keep a certain distance and women should be equipped with womanly characteristics. They are womanly virtue, womanly speech, womanly deportment, and womanly work. She talks about wife's responsibility to her husband and in-laws, and other things.

6. Effects of Confucianism in Korea

Confucianism came to Korea during the era of the three kingdoms(1st century B.C.-6th century A.D.), but it became the national religion and political and ethical orthodoxy in the Chosun dynasty(1392-1510). After much coercion and governmental pressures it became rooted in people's life and thought in the 16th century. In the present day teachings of Confucianism may not be practised word for word, however, we still see many behavioural responses of the people coming from its teaching.

For instance people still prefer boys to girls and they think that woman's place is in the home, whereas men's place is in the wider society; women should behave in traditional, womanly manner, and men should remain predominant.

They say that old generals never die but just fade away, but I would like to say that old cultures too do not die out easily nor do they easily fade away. As we long for a

¹² Ibid., p. 157

¹³ Ibid., p. 144

new day, our vision must be clear and articulated in terms of selectively preserving the best of our cultural heritages, but we must be clear in our vision that the patriarchal dualism and hierarchy must be firmly rejected.

In order to illustrate the effect of Confucianism in Korea I shall recall a story.

A few years ago there was a case in which four sisters killed themselves in despair. When their mother married and had her first child, she gave birth to a girl and so her disappointed parents-in-law named the baby "Pitiful" (Sop-sop). Her second and third children were also girls. So the mother of this poor family had given birth to three girls, but family pressures for a son kept building. Finally she had her fourth child and it was a boy; the family feast on this jubilant occasion lasted many days. The mother was very happy now that her son's name would appear in the family tree. But one son was not enough for her parents-in-law or for her husband, so she had another child and it was a girl. They didn't even name her, but simply called her "Infant" (Agi). The family of seven rented a small basement room and lived a life of poverty. Frustration drove the husband to drink and to beat his family. Meanwhile the mother began to blame her innocent daughters for their miserable lives. Her 12-year-old daughter Sop-sop began to think that she and her sisters were the primary cause of the family's despair. On returning home from work one afternoon, the mother discovered all four of her daughters lying dead on the floor. A message on a small piece of paper next to Sop-sop read, "Mum and Dad, we wish you much happiness with our brother. Now the useless girls have gone." Doctors could only save the life of one of the sisters. This tragedy illustrates the strong influence of Confucianism upon family dynamics where sons are favoured so much more than daughters.

Conclusion

We have studied positive aspect of Confucianism: its cosmology and its all-reaching relationality and ideology of Jen. At first glance one is impressed by the holistic, non-individualistic, inclusive outlook for human relationships, cosmological and inclusive religious-philosophical approach especially the quotation from Analects (see above), seem just perfect, beautiful and excellent.

However, as a women I am obliged to question the fundamental perspective from which even such a beautiful statement in the Analects is made. After seeing all these perfectly systematised explanation of the womanly way, I have to say, that these words of Analects stem from androcentrism and hierarchical patriarchal dualism.

Androcentrism means a system putting the male sex in the center and the other (female sex), in the periphery. Patriarchal dualism divides all living beings, from the insignificant to the entire universe, into two categories and a particular fixed meaning is imposed on the basis of androcentric priorities. When it is combined with the hierarchical, with class conception or stratification added onto dualism, the dualism is further divided into racism and classism. Therefore it cannot be holistic, though it sounds or seems to be such. We have also seen how systematically and

convincingly woman's way is differentiated from man's, and explained with profound meaning, so that even religious devotion is roused on the part of women to passionately pursue the so called women's virtues. On the surface there is no overt and stated violence against women in Confucianism since it seems that women voluntarily undergo and inflict violence on themselves. However, the way the social and cultural norms have been established on the ground of the oppressive androcentric value system, womenfolk traditionally accepted the violence as a noble cultural expression.

In order to illustrate this I shall narrate yet another story. Ms. xxx grew up in a middle-class family with traditional Confucian upbringing. During her high school days, a class teacher asked the students to write letters to the soldiers in the frontline and in the course of exchange of letters with one of the soldiers she has begun to sense a tender feeling towards him. When this became known to her parents a crisis ensued. It was told to her that the respectable thing for a girl to do would be to marry a man chosen by her parents.

Her conviction was that the decent and respectable thing to do would be to offer her virginity to a man whom she truly loves. And when she became aware of her pregnancy, the whole world fell on her. Without money and with a sense of fear and abandonment she eventually made her way into prostitution near the U.S. military camp. After fifteen years of drudgery, she finally met up with a Roman Catholic sister who engaged in the work of rehabilitating women like Ms. xxx. After her liberation experience, she now works with that sister.

In this story, like the story of four sisters who died, violence is committed by woman herself, but when we think harder we find it is hardly self-inflicted. They were brainwashed in such a way as to undervalue the worth of their lives. We see much of indoctrination, direct or indirect, and threats from parents and society at large. In this way there is more indirect violence than direct, and overt provocation.

Therefore, I would like to propose to all my sisters to be discerning of the liberative and oppressive aspects of cultures and religions, whether it be our own or other people's, and help women to cultivate the positive aspects of our cultures and combat the dehumanising aspects of religious interpretations.

Frau PARK LEE Sun-Ai, Editor "in God's image"

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