

## **Is Confucianism to be blamed for Gender Inequality in East Asia?**

Angela Ki Che Leung

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Confucianism is understood as a patriarchal lineage system aligned with loyalty to the state. It underlies East Asian political economies - China, Japan, and Korea – and was a target of attack at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when East Asia, challenged by the industrializing West, tried to transform itself on the Western model.

The arduous quest for modernity in East Asia was typically articulated in terms of reforming traditional rites, rituals, and authoritarian governance, understood as pillars of the Confucian ethical system, and replacing them with modern Western values such as science and democracy. The “liberation” of women as main victims of oppressive Confucian political regimes was considered a key indicator of the success of the modern nation states where all citizens, especially women, were supposed to be freer, happier and wealthier in a more egalitarian society.

The feminist academic approach to East Asian History began with this assumption in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After almost a century, scholarly work reveals a far more complex picture of traditional Confucian societies than initially imagined.

Focusing on two important areas of East Asian gender studies: gendered social space, and gendered body, I will attempt to reformulate the question of gender inequality in Confucian East Asia in the light of changing women's role today.

First, let us look at gendered social space, as sphere of women's activities, and its regional varieties:

Confucianism has characteristically been accused of confining women in an "inner" or "domestic" or "private" space depriving them of public education, economic and political participation. Academic research in the past decades, however, has revealed a much more nuanced and complex picture of Confucian social space. It is now widely accepted that the so-called inner/outer zones were not strictly segregated spheres but organically linked and integrated to form a cosmo-political order. The "inner" space was not the same as the "private" sphere in

Western bourgeois society, where the public was excluded. The Confucian inner sphere, for example, was where women played the “public” role of the teacher of future political and cultural leaders. The example of the mother of Mencius (the Confucius sage second only to Confucius living in the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century before common era) cutting the threads on her loom to reprimand her playful son for not studying hard enough is a story known to all Chinese children. Here the abandoning of a woman’s domestic work was analogous to a man’s abortive public career, or even of a failed social order. (Now you know the origin of the East Asian “Tiger Mom”!) Equally abundant in history and literature were examples of women as successful managers of households and lineages. As widows, they often had the power of making major decisions on property arrangement, including dividing family assets among their sons, creating new branches of the lineage.

Women’s crucial roles as educators and managers of the lineage, which was the vital pillar of the Confucian cosmopolitical order, reveals how their position in the “inner realm” actually defined the configuration of the “outer” social, economic and political realm. Women’s prescribed roles as teachers, mentors, caretakers and managers in the inner space of the family

and lineage, grooming future generations of elites, reproducing the Confucian socio-political order, suggest that women's role actually transcended the inner/outer boundary. This is the same for peasant as well as literati women.

Let us also reflect on the diversities of regional cultures that claimed Confucian orthodoxy. In the Pearl River Delta at the southeastern margin of China, for example, uncharacteristic Confucian customs such as spinsterhood, delayed transfer marriages, meaning married women delayed living with their husbands' family until their first pregnancy, and matrilineal lineages of commercial enterprises, were endorsed by the Neo-Confucian state as respectable and proper. Women in these specific social structures were even celebrated as filial daughters or capable matriarchs. In 17<sup>th</sup>- century Japan, the anxiety over women's ability to escape the home to find new work opportunities was revealed in the Neo-Confucian ethical text *Greater Learning for Women* that was supposed to restrict women's activities. These diverging versions of Confucian social organizations allowing a significant degree of women autonomy point to the fact that local economic life, marriage customs

prevailed over abstract Confucian ethical principles that were far from universal in East Asia throughout history.

The Pearl River Delta example, in fact, demonstrates that the success of Confucianism in East Asia consists precisely of its malleability, and its ability to include a wide range of social and cultural practices into an eclectic system with varying gender roles so long as they did not challenge the legitimacy of the state in a self-proclaimed Confucian cosmo-political order.

Let us now turn to the second area: the gendered body, by looking at two frequently cited examples of women's body being "subjugated" by Confucian precepts.

First, the bound feet. The image of late imperial and early modern Chinese women with tiny, bound feet secluded in their inner chamber constitutes probably the strongest statement denouncing Confucianism as a cruel, misogynist ideology that reduced women mobility by physical mutilation. This post 11<sup>th</sup> century practice was often explained as a Neo-Confucian fundamentalist strategy to ensure that women could not

transgress the inner space. This argument, popular and persuasive, was actually a modern one, proposed by Chinese radical reformists and revolutionaries of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost nine centuries after its appearance.

The thorough study of foot-binding by Dorothy Ko, however, shows that the historical origin of the practice remained unclear as written documentation was surprisingly lacking, contrary to the strong Confucian tradition of mounting up written records on proper rituals and practices. Late imperial scholars, in fact, found it extremely difficult to justify this practice. Neo-Confucian philosophers even criticised the practice as immoral as it contradicted the fundamental Confucian principle of filial piety according to which one should not mutilate one's "natural" body given by the parents. Moreover, examples of women with bound feet traveling and working outside their homes abound. The bound feet did not really keep women immobile, and the inner space did not become significantly more restrictive in the late imperial period. All these show that the Confucian concern of keeping women in the inner space was logically not a satisfactory explanation for the origin and the popularity of this practice.

An even more intriguing example of the gendered body is the case of women's reproductive body. The Confucian patrilineal desire for male heirs for sustaining the lineage exerted considerable pressure on women's reproductive body. This is true even today in all of East Asia. In history, this pressure was revealed in 2 related developments: first the early emergence of a medical specialty on women's health, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and maturing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a topic thoroughly studied by Jender Lee and Charlotte Furth. This precocious medical specialty focusing on women's reproductive body showed an increasing awareness of the specificity of women psycho-somatic make-up, affecting their fertility. The new medical field also justified a closer, though not necessarily direct surveillance over women's fertility by Confucian male doctors. At the same time, moral prescriptions and public attack on abortion and infanticide, practices often contrived between the mother and the midwife, were systematically published. The emergence of public foundling homes in late imperial China is another illustration of the trend.

The twin development of "women's medicine" alongside with moralistic attack on female infanticide actually shows the

tremendous efforts of Confucian male elites or the state to control women's fertility, and their limited success. Prof Kohama Masako's thorough research on birth control in the People's Republic of China from the 1950s onward clearly demonstrates the persistence of the historical situation in which the success of state demographic policy depends largely on women's perception of and decision on their own fertility.

East Asian scholars on gender studies have convincingly shown that Confucianism was not, and is not an abstract and rigid philosophy or socio-political system fixed in history. It has never been an ideology that explicitly imposed gender inequality, though it prescribed gendered roles. Confucianism co-evolved with social, economic, technological changes in history in different parts of East Asia. It thus co-evolved also with changing gender relations, bending canonical precepts to make allowance for practical social and economic needs in real life.



Confucianism has also been interpreted and used differently in different historical periods. In the modern period, it was first considered as the origin of East Asian backwardness and failure to modernize (eg. Joseph Needham considered Confucianism the main culprit for China's failure to develop science). Then in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists explained East Asian economic success and technological entrepreneurship by the Confucian nature of the region's social organization. Even the revolutionary state of the People's Republic of China, which in the past has mobilized on a national scale political campaigns against Confucianism as feudal and backward, now feels comfortable in promoting world-wide Confucius Institutes as tokens of China's soft power.

The fact that East Asia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gradually but readily "liberated" their women, without any bloody revolution, into a newly conceived "public sphere" on the Western model where women received public education and pursued careers outside the home demonstrates once again the malleability of the Confucian perception of gendered social space. [SUCH AS THE USE OF THE GOOD WIFE, WISE MOTHER "ryosai kenbo" IDEOLOGY IN THE MEIJI PERIOD/LATE 19TH CENTURY; relegated them to a

[domestic role in the Meiji](#) ] East Asian patriarchal states' new task is to take fuller advantage of the growing number of talented, educated women in the public sphere. This is something they are still learning to do to avoid the waste of human talent, which is the whole purpose of this Gender Summit. Similarly, East Asian women's enthusiastic engagement with modern reproductive technology is also an illustration of their traditional knowledge, skills and desire to retain control over their fertility. East Asian states simply need to have better and more honest assessment of the reasons behind declining women's fertility if they want to derive effective policies to reverse the general and unfortunate trend of ageing societies in East Asia, a trend of great global concern.

A perfectly equal society is an ideal, a dream that humanity has been pursuing since time immemorial, and has not yet become a reality. East Asian societies had, for centuries, perceived the question of social justice for women within the framework of the patriarchal lineage system as key integral part of the Confucian cosmo-political order. But when ethical tenets were to be implemented in real life to harmonize with Confucian cosmology, eclectic systems were built and re-constructed in

different parts of the bigger region with varying traditions, by both men and women, rulers and the ruled with changing and diverging needs and desires, in continuous negotiations. The agency of East Asian women in this process has been shown to be crucial in the past. It can only become even more so in the future.