

Ethical reflections from confucianism: the woman

Reflexiones éticas desde el confucianismo: la mujer

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Abstract

The article summarizes the position or role of women in classical Confucianism. The article starts from the classic texts of the Confucianism looking for elements of the texts that give clues to the conception and treatment of women. Confucianism as a practical philosophy becomes an ethical doctrine founded strongly on virtue with a view to improving individual man and society as a whole. Virtue is the axis of the actions of the individual and the State. Details of the role of women in society are described in the book of Rites, which is practically reduced to their role as wife and mother. The subordination of women to men and in their decision-making is clearly established in the texts. Concluding, Confucianism is the relationship of kinship that achieves the gender of women. Although, as for Catholicism, both sexes are complementary.

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1. Introduction

In order to understand any culture different from one's own, it is essential to understand the alterity of the other, since, if not, you cannot judge what is intended. In China, culture has been impregnated with Confucianism, and therefore it is necessary to know its cultural idea.

This intervention seeks from the Catholic perspective, to interpret some of the consequences of the Confucius doctrine regarding women. Because philosophy is a way of life based on reflection, it is that in this sense these ways of presenting philosophical reflection intersect.

Although Confucianism is a teaching of personal improvement, and of taking care of appropriate interrelationships, there is a gap between the moral teachings of this doctrine and the historical reality of gender oppression in Imperial China. Nevertheless, this does not differ with the Catholic religion, and so many others, in which the woman has also been undervalued in previous times in everyday practice, even though this is contrary to the evangelical teachings and the Magisterium. That is why it is worth assessing whether women came to have an active role in this tradition.

Confucianism is typically interpreted in two ways: First, as the response to the political and social disorder of the time by the continuous wars and quarrels among the feudal lords of the region. It cannot be considered a religion, as Confucius himself stressed, but only a series of norms of moral conduct that with practice become a habit, and therefore a virtue. Alternatively, in a second interpretation, as an applied or practical philosophy, according to modern terminology.

II. Doctrinal content

It is based on the recognition of a cosmic order, which he considers perfect, and that as such, must be imitated in human behavior. Therefore, it establishes a code of conduct. These moral norms are traditional for the Chinese culture of the imperial era, thus they were well accepted. Five pillars constitute the inspiration of Confucianism, which are, altruism, tolerance, mutual respect, social harmony and fulfilling duty. Despite proposing tolerance, and perhaps for the purpose of trying to achieve a political order, Confucius declares that every ruler must be moral and do good, and that, in this virtuous morality, true nobility consisted, and not only in the origin of his birth. Perhaps that was the cause of popularity among the people, and of rejection among the nobility, to which he himself belonged. That is why he was persecuted during the Ts'in dynasty, but, during the Han dynasty, it became the official philosophy of the State. Such was the situation, until the beginning of the communist regime, which has subsequently rebounded. Despite the difficulties of Confucianism in the history of China, it cannot be accepted that even today it is considered as the basis of culture, although Taoism and Buddhism are also, but Confucianism prevails more strongly.

The four books of Confucius (Great Learning; Doctrine of the Mean; Analects and Mencius) were not written by him, directly, but are compilations of his followers. That, obviously, makes it difficult to establish with transparency the authentic doctrine of the Philosopher, since there were even texts prior to his birth that were incorporated. However, it is possible to select the philosophical ideas about virtue that can be applied to the context of women, as well as the rituals of daily activities in which there exist codes of conduct that are characteristic of women, and others common to both sexes.

In addition, there has been a resurgence of Confucianism in China, as stated in the article published by the Young Chen

College of Mexico, on this subject, which explains it by observing four phenomena:

«...The campaign to recite Confucian classics,¹ the rebirth of Confucian academies, and the restoration of Confucian rites. ...[As well as]... the Jiang Qing argues that the socio-political and cultural conditions of contemporary China have paved the way for the emergence of traditionalist movements... [With] the combination of fundamentalist philosophy of Jiang Qing and his strict moral self-discipline» (1) (Cheng, Y. 2013).

As an example of the resurgence of this tradition, since 2010, for the first time, after 100 years. There has been a wedding celebration with ancient Confucian rites, and it is considered a form of promotion to strengthen the Chinese family model. Another example is the premiere ceremony of the brushes, as the beginning of schooling, which is currently considered a state tradition, despite coming from the Confucianist tradition.

However, this philosophical- «religious» doctrine has undergone changes, particularly in its values (2). Confucianism emphasizes that faults are not punished, and that instead, values are strengthened through rites, so that the individual is ashamed of himself when he behaves outside this moral. This revival of «religious» costumbrist type differs from Confucianist studies, which have been part of the learning of the modern state. In addition, in this century it has also strengthened in Taiwan. This rebirth is also related to a kind of «protection or shield» against Christianity.

III. Confucianism as a philosophy

It should be noted that Confucianism has also been considered as an applied philosophy. It is true that there are metaphysical statements about the order of the world; however, as such they are not presented as dogmas that the believer must admit. It is an ethical

doctrine founded strongly on virtue with a view to improving individual man and society as a whole:

«The law of the Great Study, or of practical Philosophy, consists in developing and giving birth to the luminous principle of the reason we have received from Heaven, in renewing men, in placing their definitive destiny in perfection or sovereign well» (3, Pos. 566).

Confucius reinforced the importance of the traditional family in Chinese society, by insisting on the respect of children for fathers and on the obedience of women to their husbands. It also reinforced the submission of the people to the authorities, although rejecting tyranny: the subjects owed obedience to the sovereign, since the State existed to seek the good of the governed; but, for the same reason, the rulers had to govern according to straight ethical principles, applying the moral example and not force. He dreamed of the return to an idealized past in which a wise and kind emperor (the «son of Heaven») ruled and was obeyed as a father by his children, in a general climate of peace and order. Likewise, it indicates that perfection, although individual must also include perfecting others (3). This leads to an inner peace where he will say: «... to have a calm and peaceful spirit, one can soon enjoy that unalterable rest that nothing can disturb» (3, Pos. 571).

It certainly reminds of the position of stoicism in the Western world. Thus, for example, when Confucius affirms that the superior man does not seek pleasures or idleness and that he seeks to maintain himself with righteous principles «in order to regulate his conduct. Such a man can be called a philosopher, or who delights in the study of wisdom» (3 Post 1256). If this compares to Seneca's position, similarities or approaches are similar:

«... Philosophy... is not in words but in works. Nor should it be used to spend the day with any pleasure to take away your annoyance to idleness. Forms and shapes the soul, orders life, governs actions, indicates what must be done and omitted... Without it no one can live without fear» (4, Pos. 62).

The wise man must address with reason and follow the nature of things in order to be wise (3). The state of equilibrium is the control of passions, which, expressed in an appropriate degree, constitutes harmony. For Confucius, the relationship between the two constitutes the ethical path.

IV. The woman: allusions in the texts

Confucius' texts make few allusions to women directly as part of the application of philosophy. Instead, in the rites, there is a clear differentiation between man and woman. Above all, the social role of both is described. The woman is responsible for being a wife or concubine, and mother (Mentions the mother of certain characters) (3). In total, there are 60 references to women, but most are anecdotal. However, it is true that Confucius considers women as a person who can accomplish the same achievements as men when it comes to wisdom, however, wise women have less social presence than men have, and are subject to it:

Kungtsé said: «Talented men are rare and hard to find; isn't this true? From the time of Chang (Yao) and Yu (Chun), even these ministers full of merit, there has only been one woman, as well as nine men of merit, and that is everything» (3, Pos. 1748).

In Confucianism, there is a clear indication towards family ties that may have influenced oppression of women in pre-modern times, such as filial piety seen as a virtue, the continuity of the family name and the veneration of ancestors of the family patriarch, which required offspring of men. That is why infanticide of girls has been practiced since then; but to save resources for boys.

In addition, the woman is subordinate to her wife's duties and must follow the traditions of her time (3). The book of the *Liji* Rites states that marriage has the dual purpose of perpetuating the lineage, and of providing the temple with the sacrifices for ma-

riage. In this book, you can understand that the woman had only a role of functionality. The woman out of wedlock had no place in society, regardless of class, culture or age.

The man could have a legitimate wife and concubines. Moreover, the role he gave to each one did not depend on his feelings, but on the usefulness of them for his in-laws. In other words, it would be the male's parents, who had preeminence over their male children, and even more, over their women. The wives of the children were to serve their in-laws, just as they served their own parents (5). However, children of all of them are protected, especially if paternal grandparents loved them:

If the parents had a boy born of a maid, or a son or grandson of one of his concubines, with whom they were very fond, all of their children had to, after his death, lose respect for him.

If a son had two concubines, which one of them did his parents love, while he loved the other one, he should not dare to level this last one in an equal to the previous one, whom his parents loved, with clothes, food, or with the duties she performed, nor should he diminish his attention towards her after their death.

If he liked his wife very much, but his parents did not like her, he had to divorce her.

If he did not like his wife very much and his parents said, «she serves us well», he had to behave with her with all due respect to a wife, without missing until the end of her life (5, Pos. 39).

These texts always indicate a dignified treatment of women, although within the framework of the customs of the time. In Book IX section three, the indication of the subordination of women is clear. The text points out:

«There must be sincerity in... marriages, and communication with women must be good. She will be admonished to be straight and sincere. Faithfulness is essential in every service to the other; ...is the virtue of a wife. ...[That] when the husband dies, she will not marry again... the man and not the woman takes the initiative...» (5, Pos. 22).

A little later:

The woman follows and obeys the man. In her youth, she follows her father and her older brother; when married, to her husband; when her husband dies, she follows her son (5, Pos. 23).

Men should not talk about what belongs to the interior of the house, nor women of what corresponds to the outside. Except for sacrifices and funeral rites, the containers should be passed from one to another (5), they should not go to the same well, nor to the same bathroom. They should not share the same mat at bedtime; neither borrow or borrow anything from each other; they should not wear similar upper or lower clothing (5).

Regarding the day norms, filial piety is considered as an essential virtue of those who aspire to be wise. This insists on respecting parents (3, post 1234, 1283, 1286, 1288, and 1291) even when they fail as parents (3). There is a duty not to abandon them (3), perform proper funeral ceremonies (3) and both parents must have fair rites, (3). In addition, mourning must be kept for three years (3).

It is interesting that when talking about good governance it is pointed out that it must be as father and mother of the people (3).

In the book of rites, the treatment of the elderly was considered in terms of eliminating functions that did not have to continue in their old age such as receiving food and special treatment. (5)

In respect to education, it was clearly differentiated. For example, regarding women, it is pointed out:

At the age of ten, a girl stopped leaving the women's apartments. Her governess taught her the arts of speech and pleasant ways, to be docile and obedient. Also to handle hemp fibers, to treat the buds to weave silk and form threads, thus, all the works of women; how to make the clothes, observe the sacrifices, provide the liquors and sauces, fill the different containers and dishes with preserves and pickles, and assist in the arrangement of the accessories for the ceremonies (5, p.37). At fifteen, she assumed the hairpin; at twenty, she was married, although if it had been necessary to delay the marriage, she was married at twenty-three (5, Pos. 55).

Confucianism, despite being a very complex cultural tradition, has no gender elements, conceived with the Western idea of feminist deconstruction. However, there are facts of pre-modern Chinese customs, such as female subjugation (6) that is linked to Confucianism, and other practices such as the killing of girls, or the marriage of girls who were taken home from in-laws from an early age to start serving there. The concubinage was accepted, if the original wife could not have offspring of men, which was one of the seven causes by which the marriage could be undone.

Although it is true, that Confucius speaks of certain universal values that would imply respect for women. Therefore, Walker Vadillo points out:

«Loyalty and reciprocity. In all Confucian social relations, the principle of humanity must be measured by all actions, which in turn should be corresponded with reciprocity. Thus, although women are in a position of inequality vis-à-vis men, they owe respect, generosity, tolerance, very different attributions to the social injustice that women have lived in neo-confucian countries until today» (8).

The bandage of the feet, which was used as the ethnic brand of the Han, during the invasion of Manchuria and the practices of faithfulness in widowhood, from the Ming and Qing periods, were not directly related to the lineage. However, the widow woman used it as a measure of protection, since a widow continued to be from the family, but at the same time, she could have more freedom to express herself in life and in public works. On the other hand, if she separated from the family of the deceased husband, she remained in a civil state of «non existence».

V. Old age, virtue and women: reflections in a couple of texts

However, Confucius mentions the need to attend by the emperor, the most disadvantaged ones including the elderly.

«The elders who had no women were named widowers, the old woman who had no husband was called a widow or without a partner (kua); Vanvang introducing into his government the principles of fairness and justice and practicing in all sometimes the great virtue of humanity. The book of verses says: "You can be rich and powerful; But it is necessary to have compassion for the unfortunate widowers and the orphans"» (5, Pos. 3129).

These examples make a clear reference to two factors: on one hand, that each sex had a very different social role and that within it, women were respected, although with hierarchical subjugation to the oldest woman. Again, old age gave certain «advantages» over other social members. Nevertheless, the male had a clear prevalence and the woman, although she was the mother, was subjected to it.

Analyzing some aphorisms, however, it is discovered that there is no difference in gender in terms of treatment or respect for virtue. Thus, it is mentioned that:

1. «Confucius said, "If power is used to guide subjects and to equalize them from punishment, the people will flee from them but will not be ashamed of anything".
2. "If virtue is used to guide the subjects and to match, the rites, the people will be ashamed and also be honest"» (9).

Here perhaps the meaning of the rites can be inferred. They are not only external arrangements, but also means of putting in order the matching rules, as the quotation suggests. It is not an imposition from the strongest, we would say today a «patriarchal domination», but to show or be an example in the rightfulness, but does not imply automatic equalization as for the action. Virtue is thus, given in the difference of functions and positions and unified by virtue. Rites that way become the means and not the end of political action. It is not about preserving rites as such, but each one, should be oriented towards giving a proper position. It may be ob-

jected that the rites themselves are vicious by the indicated subordination, but at least the spirit of Confucius does not put it that way. An example may be differences in dress or funeral rites. Even in the West, we consider that the rites associated to them serve us to «know how to behave as equals among different ones». Rites are not mechanizations simply because Confucius himself points out that «Learning without thinking is useless, thinking without learning is dangerous» (B). The social rites that differentiate men and women in that perspective are learned to be able to match everyone, that is, they must be practiced and accepted by different people, but understood in their right sense and that if they only reproduce themselves, there indeed, can be seen as coercers of freedom as such.

Confucius points out in his books that old age is a culmination from wisdom (9) since passions are harmonized there. He does not make any gender distinction. Another example: when referring to the government of King Wen (who ruled Qi), Confucius does not distinguish in degree of attention to the widows and widowers of the kingdom (9).

On the other hand, when the People's Republic of China was established, discrimination against women was taken as a claim. China was purged of Confucianism, considering that people, particularly women, were viewed as inferior. Thus, with the Fourth Movement of May, and the Communist Cultural Revolution, it enters modernity (70s) and into the international community (6). Simultaneously in the world, the boom of the feminist movement was forged, to which China joined (10). In other countries, such as Japan, following the Confucianist ideas, respect for old women will be generated as part of the filial piety already indicated where generations coexist with each other as part of filial respect (11). However, this subject deserves more space. What has been wanted to show here is the conceptual elements that appear in Confucius, that promote a debate on gender considered with variables such as old age.

Conclusions

The patriarchal family, as part of the Chinese culture, does not mean that the woman would consider herself a victim, but that culturally she was part of the cultural transmission and her social role was very marked. Obviously, from the western perspective, it is perceived in the opposite way. Focusing on Catholicism, it has been criticized from the perspective of gender feminism, that women be «submitted» to be a mother, wife, etcetera; ...although it is not an obligation to be, as we well know, but for Catholicism recognizing the biological and cultural sexual difference is not a reason for wailing nor oppression.

The western woman sees herself independent to establish the ties she wants. While the pre-modern Chinese woman, used to see herself as dependent on family ties. Without them, she would be in a serious situation of vulnerability, having no relationship with anyone. In Catholicism, women have the same dignity as men, and like them, she is free. However, both are called to holiness, through the fulfilment of the Will of God; and the missions in life, are a vocation or call, in which the person is fully developed, by surrendering, as in the case of marriage, for the love of God to his/her spouse and children.

In Confucianism, it is the relationship of kinship, the one that achieves the gender of women. Although, as for Catholicism, both sexes are complementary. In Confucianism, it is through the Ying-Yang, but with greater emphasis, it is through the spheres of action: the private and the public. It is not that the woman could not receive instruction, but that her role was aimed on the Nei family, rather than on the external sphere, because the family is the basis, on which a harmonious state is built. For example, the «private» virtue of filial piety that is the common trunk for all «public» virtues and thus is a form of supplement in action.

Although Chinese women have been shown as submissive, illiterate, and oppressed, there are texts where they themselves write a

different reality to some extent. Formal education in ancient times was acquired in the upper social classes, but instead female power was common to all spheres, only always subject to kinship: the daughter was subject to her parents, and then to the husband and in-laws. However, when she became a mother-in-law, the daughters and daughters-in-law were subject to her. There are examples in the literature of skilled women in the art of discussion, argumentation, wisdom, etcetera; ...and they were able to teach their sons and daughters their roles in the world. Although many women published literary works, they did not have access to *Wei* or public office, to put their talents at the service of the State.

The disparity between *Wei* and *Nei*, highlights the difference and subjugation between men and women in premodern China. However, in modern Confucianism, gender acquires the Western cultural vision, only based not on the autonomous choice itself, but on the kinship ties established.

The references to the four books show us the need to live in the respect of all with all, without eliminating social differences among its members, of course a state of affairs that Confucius did not create but considered appropriate to preserve in a framework of virtue.

Bibliographic notes

¹ It is made at an early school age until early adolescence, so that children learn to accept the moral doctrine, more rigid, than the current new customs.

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