Confucian Social Legitimacy: A Gendered Approach to Concepts of Filial Piety and the Order Of Patriarchal Principles

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ABSTRACT

Confucian principles have been an immutable part of Chinese society, the process of their integration and propagation resulting in the establishment of social legitimacy over time. Max Weber considered Confucianism as one of the major world religions, although it is distinct from other major religions as it spread as a 'culture' and not as an organised missionary tradition (Helle 2016: 64). Accordingly, this paper focuses on what the ideals and expected rules of behaviour were in ancient China and how following Confucian precepts could increase social and political standing of a family. On the basis of physical and psychological differences, the virtuous conduct of men and women were distinctly defined. Ideas of political and moral authority, ideal practices of rituals, righteousness, virtue and filial piety, were all prescribed under some specific forms of social hierarchy (and thus gender hierarchy), which allowed for the propagation of differentiated expectations.

The study of gender in this context sheds light on relations of power and how the propagation of canonical and didactic texts by the State defined (and redefined) norms of womanhood as well as the agency of women, keeping the persuasion and the perpetuation of male dominance a central and integral aspect of society.

Keywords

Confucianism, Chinese Society, Gender, Women, Social Legitimacy, Chinese Family

Introduction

The study of primary source documents is essential for understanding former establishments, ways of life, people, their culture, and even violence and patterns of exclusion. These could be official government documents, classical literature, ancient songs, poems, anecdotes, and even oracle bones. One such significant document is The Analects by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Confucius is one of the most influential scholars, politicians, thinkers and reformers in not just Chinese, but East Asian history. Studying texts like The Analects help us in understanding the historicity, origin and evolution of Chinese philosophy and the role imparted to all members of the society – especially when the question of gender relations and patriarchy arises – as almost all rituals and customs in Chinese society derive their legitimacy from the Confucian classics.

The collection of sayings, compiled by Confucian's disciples after his death, impacted the fundamental social structure of China, even to the extent of altering the way the government, culture and values were to be perceived throughout history. Studying Confucianism and its edicts is made even more important considering the way they promoted patriarchy in all areas of life and how the roles that were assigned, especially to women, influenced the gender discrimination and subordination that women faced in East Asia for over 2,000 years, and continues to, in the contemporary world.

This paper attempts to outline the Confucian principles that have been an immutable part of Chinese society, and how they were integrated and propagated to establish social legitimacy.

The Roots and Precepts of Confucian Philosophy

The Warring States period (403-221 BCE), was marked by years of disorder and political turmoil, and the resultant violence led to rise of the three most influential schools of thought in East Asia: Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism, as the tumultuous times made people contemplate the nature of society, empathy, humanity, and the importance of harmony in a community.

Confucianism was propagated by the followers of Confucius, which made the writings diverse, all linking different schools of thought to Confucianism. One of the thinkers of note was Mencius, or Mengzi (372–289 or 385–303/302 BCE), who developed the unified concepts of humanity and righteousness (*renyi*, 仁义) as the common principles of selfhood and society. According to the Mencian thought, people were basically good (*shan*, 善), and their innate, natural state of goodness is what enabled them to express their humanity and rightness (*ren*, 仁 and *yi*, 义).

Another significant thinker in the development of early Confucianism was Xunzi (circa 312–230 BCE), whose focus was on the importance of education and self-cultivation. As opposed to Mencius, Xunzi believed that human nature was originally neutral and that through a necessary and fundamental process of training and education; individuals could be nurtured until they had been cultivated into people truly capable of humanity. For him, education was not just the acquisition of knowledge, but also the development of individual personality by conforming to the ways of behaviour in Confucian ritual before which one can truly express their humanity. By the Warring States period, Xunzi had assimilated communitarianism into the Confucian teachings, with rites (*ritual*, li 礼) as the norm for bringing people together in society and humanity (*ren*, 仁) as a 'confirmation of the value of human nature' (Hsu 2012: 94).

This communitarianism is what the Confucian philosophy used to link moral behaviour with traditional roles and hierarchies. Confucius was a great believer of the Zhou order and asserted that if the 'learned men' (who were experts on the performance of rituals and ceremonies, and sacrifices to ancestors) would lead all others, the rulers and subjects, nobles and commoners, parents and children, men and women, to accept and perform their assigned parts and devote themselves to their responsibilities towards others, an 'ideal world' could be achieved. This 'ideal world' would be one where conventions governed by hierarchical differentiation resulted in a harmonious coordination and a peaceful society.

Chinese Kinship Society and Filial Piety

Although Max Weber considered Confucianism as a religion (Helle 2016: 64), it is important to note it is not an organised religion, but 'a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life' (Tu 1990: 112). Confucius' aim was to cultivate a sense of empathy and morality in politics and society. In this cause, the major role, he believed, had to be played by the noblemen (*junzi*, 君子) and the learned men who had to take on the role of moral vanguards of the society. They had to reformulate and revitalise the institutions that maintain social solidarity and enabled harmony and prosperity. The family (*jia*, 家) was one such basic foundational institution.

Confucius thus extolled filial piety, the reverent respect of children towards parents, and believed that it was self-cultivation of values which began at home that acted as the basis of social order, political stability and universal peace. Filial piety is thus both a ritual as well as attitudinal and conventional actions backed by sincere feelings. It is not a form of unconditional submissiveness, rather the recognition and reverence for one's source of life. This purpose and relationship propagated by filial piety can also be extended to the

community, the country and the universe, and thus the concepts of the Emperor being the Son of Heaven, the King as the Ruler-father, and the Magistrate as the 'Father-Mother official' arose – that placed the family-centred nomenclature at the centre of the political vision. Filial piety is therefore the central concept of both family and social life.

French Sinologist Marcel Granet (1858) observed that sacred qualities were attributed to filial piety and that the eldest son defers to his father with loyalty and obedience, which are highlighted in the Confucian texts. Especially when it came to rituals, Granet theorised,

> 'When under the influence of the rituals, the agnatic principle alone governed family organisation, the piety of the son toward the father, a special aspect of the loyalty shown to an overlord, appeared, when it extended to all family relations, to lie at the root even of the bond of relationship. Hence arises a characteristic trait in the private life of the Chinese, which is so important that we must dwell upon it at length. While the domestic order seems to rest entirely upon paternal authority, the idea of respect takes absolute precedence of the idea of affection in family relationships. Regulated on the model of court assemblies, domestic life forbids all familiarity. Etiquette rules there and not intimacy' (p. 311).

Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1992) looks at rituals in a similar light and calls them 'publicly recognised behavioural norms' (p. 96) maintained not by the State, but by tradition so as to fulfil social responsibility. Therefore, filial piety was a system of civic leadership that did not take into account sentiments or emotional closeness.

Thus, between a father and son there was 'a bond of infeudation, a juridical and not a natural bond, and moreover, a bond of extra-familial nature' that did not need to be biological. Feudal order thus permeated kinship relationships. The Analects of Confucius mention a conversation with Duke of She in 489 BCE where Confucius defines law abiding conduct in the 'public sphere' to be of lesser dignity and importance than the familial duty of filial piety that has to be observed towards a father. The relationship between brothers is also the topic of a famous dialogue in the Analects: 'A benevolent man does not lay-up anger, nor cherish resentment against his brother, but only regards him with affection and love. Regarding him with affection, he wishes him to be honourable: regarding him with love, he wishes him to be rich' (Helle 2017: 127).

The triangular relationship formed by the father, mother, and child, is the foundation of the kinship structure. Fei Xiaotong calls these 'lineages' (p. 83), and differentiates them from the Western concept of families as they do not have a similar kind of strict organisational character that Western families have. Chinese families can expand their social circles when

needed patrilineally, and can even have five generations within one household. Differences in social structure produce variations in behaviour. Families have long-term continuity and the relationships between father and son and between mother and daughter-in-law are prime. These are vertical, not horizontal, relationships that were governed by the 'three obediences and the four virtues' observed by women. The three obediences were obedience to the father before marriage, the husband after marriage and the son in case of windows. The four virtues were propriety in behaviour, speech, demeanour and employment. Education for women inculcated these values and these precepts were mentioned in the book Precepts for Women (*Nujie*, 女杰) by Ban Zhao, a famous female scholar of the Han period.

Women accumulated power over time, but that did not reflect a change in women's power relationship in terms of gender relations. Women were effectively able to exercise power over the son's family, specifically the daughter-in-law, i.e. against their own sex, thereby further ensuring the legitimacy of male power structures.

Moreover, all Chinese families have family rules, usually enforced by the family patriarch. There should be mutual respect between the husband and wife. For the father-son relationship, the father should practise responsibility and the son should observe obedience. These special characteristics of groups were outlined for ease of enterprise.

In wealthy and scholarly families, men and women often occupied separate areas of the household, with men being consigned to the outer portions of the house, and women the inner quarters. This separation was not only physical, but also psychological. Fei Xiaotong noted a level of indifference between husbands and wives while he was conducting surveys in rural China. The age and sex based social separation in Chinese society, characterised by 'reserve and restraint (p. 86), is a product of an environment dominated by lineages. Every person has their roles defined by convention.

Another additional social context that can help one understand the designation of status in the kinship system of Chinese society is language. Language shapes one's perceptions of the world and the Chinese language has a rich vocabulary when it comes to family relations. Each grandparent, aunt or uncle has a separate term which would specify their affiliation to either the paternal or the maternal side. Similarly, there are different words to denote an older or a younger sibling. These minute differentiations in the terminology of kinship relations suggest the significance of familial distinctions.

Rituals of Filial Piety and Ancestor Worship as the Religion of China

Early texts such as *Shangshu* (尚书), *Zuozhuan* (左传), *Hou Hanshu* (后汉书) and the 'Canonical Book of Filial Piety', or the *Xiaojing* (孝经), played an important role in preaching filial piety as the absolute virtue and treating the worship and reverence for one's parents as comparable to the worship of God in the West which made ancestral worship a crucial part of Chinese social life.

The centrality and importance of family and the kinship network can first and fore-mostly be understood by a person's name. In most East Asian cultures where Confucian systems are followed, family names precede the given name which indicates the importance attached to a person's descent vis-à-vis individual identity.

Through a study of ancient burials and texts, Donald Holzman (1998) traced the intensification of filial and ancestral piety to later Han dynasty (25-220 BCE), becoming the 'imperial' virtue par excellence and laying the foundation of the idea of reaching the gods through one's ancestors, a very distinctive Chinese practice. He found inscriptions on ritual vases that mentioned offerings of filial piety to ancestors in ancestral temples and that the word 'xiao' (孝) initially just meant a religious act, or a form of pious commemoration of one's ancestors, but later assumed the meaning of filial respect for one's living parents. He corroborates it with several stories of filial piety that are used to illustrate the moral code in ancient texts; thus according the origins of performativity in filial piety to the ancient period.

Classical Confucianism posited that the performance of correct rites morally transformed people and the development of rites can be seen on three levels: government authorities stressing on the differentiation of the masses based on their political status, with separate forms of rites for the emperor, nobles, officials, and commoners; educated elite and intellectuals rationalising the ceremonies, by treating sacrifices as a way to commemorate rather than worship the dead; and the common people adding to their rites and performing sacrifices on more occasions and to more ancestors owing to religious impulses and belief in ghosts.

Graves grew in importance as a major site of ancestor worship during the Song era. Ancestors were thought to be residing at their graves, and people thus made both offerings as well as reports to them there. The religious veneration for one's parents as a means of communicating with heaven thus, became the highest form of filial piety. Kings communicated with their ancestors through divination, performed elaborate ancestral sacrifices, and built enormous tombs to keep their ancestors happy and healthy in the afterlife. Rules were codified for a detailed differentiation in ancestral rites based on the

political rank in the Zhou period. Commoners could not make sacrifices of meat, but they could offer vegetables to their deceased fathers once each season (Ebrey 1990: 200).

By the time of the Han dynasty, ancestor worship and elaborate funerals and burials were widely practised among the upper class and also among some common farmers. Mortuary art from the ancient times onwards gives us a glimpse into a strong popular belief in ghosts and the ability of descendants to ease their parents' afterlife and thus, tombs were built by all those who could afford them.

Placing Gender and Patriarchy in Confucian Society

The study of 'gender' in society has gained prominence in the last few decades owing to a long history of neglect, yet there is a need to command a full picture of even the most basic facts about women's place in history and society. Moreover, a context of their lives needs to be built by studying male-female relations, on both individual and institutional levels. This allows one to see gendered relations from the lens of power and analyse how through the propagation of canonical and didactic texts, the State defined and redefined the norms of womanhood as well as the agency of women.

According to the Chinese historian Zang Jian (2003), by the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties (960-1279 CE), Confucian ethical thinking on gender relations and women was shaped by the 'nexus of blood and territorial relations' (p. 123) which dictated the habits and practices to be followed. The central classical Confucian tenet, the ethical concept of Three Bonds-Five Relations, rationalised and naturalised status hierarchies.

The filiality of daughters and daughters-in-law was not described in the Classic of Filial Piety, but two other influential works: Liu Hsiang's Biographies of Great Women and Precepts for Women by Ban Zhao. The Yin and Yang cosmology also contributed to the differentiation of women, and thus the divergent natures of men and women merited different conduct. These differences were considered to be a part of the natural order and men and women were expected to manage their respective economic and reproductive activities by strictly following assigned rules of behaviour.

Based on these considerations, Patrcia Ebrey (1990) described the following as the key features of the patriarchal Chinese family system:

> '(1) a conception of property, especially land, as family rather than individual
> property, (2) the idea that this property belongs to the men of the family and
> must be divided equally among brothers whenever divided, (3) the legal

authority of fathers over women and children, which includes the father's right to arrange the marriage of his children, to sell his children, and to dispose of their labo(u)r, and (4) the notion that women are morally and intellectually less capable than men and therefore are to be under male control' (p. 204).

The institution of marriage was entrenched in patriarchal conventions, patrilineality and filial piety. While men were limited to having just one wife, there was no cap on the number of concubines. Marriage between patrilineal kin or those with the same surname was prohibited and family heads had full authority to arrange their children's marriages. According to the Book of Rites, the objective of marriage was to serve the ancestors in the temple as well as the coming generations. Thus, the role of wives in all ancestral rites was integral and no man could complete a ritual without his wife. So, marriage was the 'completing of this house' (*cheng jia*, 成家) for the man and 'going out of the house' (*chu men*, 出门), to serve the family of the in-laws, for the woman (Baber 1934: 136). There were several sorts of concubines with hierarchies and roles of their own, but only the legal wife (*qi*, 妻) worshipped her husband's ancestors. Specifically demarcated family divisions enhanced peace and harmony within lineages and neighbourhoods and thus women were in charge of the private sphere and took care of domestic responsibilities while the men took charge of the public sphere.

Although, in terms of discourse, having sons allowed women to gain some modicum of power in their later years, women remained clearly subordinated to men. A woman did not possess power or authority in her own right. She ultimately remained dependent on the good will of her husband and sons.

Even the eligibility of a woman for marriage was decided by the family she was born into, more than her 'virtues' or abilities. Heredity was an important consideration and the account of one's family back three generations (*sandai*, 三代) was exchanged by the families to confirm ancestry. In the same vein, the five types of women who were considered 'unfit' for marriage were: 'daughter of a rebellious house; daughter of a disorderly house; the daughter of a house that has produced criminals for more than one generation; daughter of a leprous house; and the daughter who has lost her father and elder brother' (Legge 1960: 104, cited in Baber 1934: 132).

For a marriage to be valid, it had to be approved by both sets of parents and after the contract was drawn, gifts from the groom and dowry from the bride's side of the family were exchanged, only then did the marriage become legally binding. Reports during the Song Dynasty complain about the expectation of a large dowry and betrothal gifts from the bride's families and how that became the main criteria for choosing a bride. That is said to be one of the reasons for female infanticide in China. The high cost and pressure of dowry eventually

came to be recognised as a major problem among the ordinary people. Some officials went so far as to set limits on the size of dowries to ease people's burdens and discourage female infanticide. Female infanticide was thus a result of poverty and the practice of primogeniture for the continuation of the line. Boys were preferred over girls for the sake of patrilineal descent and the needs of blood relations.

Widow chastity was also an important marker of patriarchy in Chinese society. While women could remarry after three years of mourning, remarriage was against convention and such women were looked down upon. In Song society, the government rewarded young widows who remained unmarried for a long time with honorary banners and sometimes grants of grain as a way of 'improving customs' (Ebrey 1990: 208).

While masculine virtues remain relatively constant throughout the historical record, feminine virtues have differing accounts under different political periods, owing to distinctive changes in the meaning and practice of womanly virtue. Under no period of traditional Chinese history did women enjoy property rights, which entrenched the subordination of women into every aspect of their lives, leading to an easy acceptance and reverence of practices like the maintenance of female chastity and foot-binding; and the defining and re-defining of the norms and standards of what constitutes ideals of beauty and virtuousness.

Conclusion

The philosophy of Confucianism at its premise is central to the perpetuation of male dominance within it. The base of social institutions, including the culture, writing, art, moral authority and education, as were all entrenched in a patriarchal structure. In such a world that is organised around 'male scripts', women are either erased from the canons, or relegated to minor trope-like positions to complement male stories and perspectives. Ideas of political and moral authority, ideal practices of rituals, righteousness, virtue and filial piety, are all prescribed under some form of social hierarchy (and thus gender hierarchy) allows for the propagation of such differentiated expectations.

Confucian virtues of filial piety (*xiao*, 孝), righteousness (*yi*,义), loyalty (*zhong*,忠), or fidelity (*xin*,信) are not defined in canon or classical writings, rather they are illustrated. They are thus an integral part of society to be seen as a whole, and accepted as a priori. On the basis of physical and psychological differences between both genders, virtuous conduct of men and women was different.

There are few standardisations and commonalities that can be found across China such as, descent was patrilineal, offerings were made to recent ancestors, family property was divided

among brothers, marriages within the patrilineal kin were looked down upon and disapproved, all women were expected to get married, late marriages were rare, adoption was common and accepted, young married couples started their lives together in the home of senior relatives after marriage, and so on, and these can be used to further study the basic structure of the Chinese Confucian society.

While this paper focused on what the ideals and expected rules of behaviour were and how they were followed to increase social and political standing of a family, it is equally important to note that these practices were not uniformly followed amongst all classes and/or regions. The lives and mentalities of the working-class women were different from those of the upper-class gentry families. While their motivations and customs may differ, the common denominator for all women was the centrality of the family in structuring their lives. Social legitimacy offered very little leeway in what was considered desirable and undesirable behaviour and shows the dynamic nature of power relations in Chinese society.

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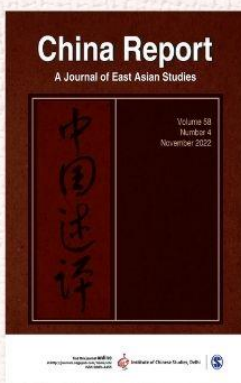
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