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## Review of “The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender”

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## Book Review

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*The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* . Edited by Chenyang Li (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2000, 256 pages).

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Just as some Christian sects go to great and understandable lengths to make clear their belief that feminism and Christianity can cohabitate, so in this volume the contributors take pains to meld fundamental Confucian beliefs and their amenability to feminist thought.

The contributors include Roger Ames, Patricia Ebrey, Paul Rakita Goldin, David L. Hall, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Joel J. Kupperman, Pauline C. Lee, Chenyang Li, Michael Nylan, Lisa Raphals, Ingrid Shafer, and Sandra D. Wawrytko. Their areas of expertise range from philosophy to Chinese studies to history to religious studies to comparative literature to Asian Studies. This is an ambitious and wide-ranging volume.

Early in the first essay, "The Confucian Concept of *Jen* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study," Chenyang Li states "Morality concerns the code of acceptable behavior in a society." In a broad sense, this is certainly true, although one's construal of "acceptable behavior" needs to be broad enough to encompass dissent -- and so one might want to refine his construal although, to his credit, he does not offer this as an analysis of morality per se. This caveat aside, anybody interested in understanding the Chinese concept of *Jen* cannot do better than to begin with this essay. A perennial problem in contemporary ethical discussions is to harness the tendency toward analysis in light of the fact that, at bottom, moral traditions differ. Chenyang (referring to Mencius, Confucius, and others) shows that in Chinese thought, the "*jen* of affection" precedes the "*jen* of virtue" (i.e., one cannot have the latter without first obtaining the former) (p. 26). What is *jen*? "Perfect virtue," is Chenyang Li's suggestion. In its nearest Western equivalent, *ceteris paribus*, it would be *eudaimonia*.

Chenyang Li's essay alone is reason to be excited about this volume, but there's more. Joel J. Kupperman gives exquisite nuance to the connections not only between Kantian and Confucian ethics, but also to the juxtaposition between Eastern and Western conceptions of the Self. Consider, for example, this remark on page 44: ". . . issues of categories, roles, and the formation and the sense of self seem to me to include the deepest questions of feminist ethical philosophy." Since Confucian thought clearly contains a concern for all these elements, as does feminism, Kupperman is doing the philosophical community a clear service in drawing together these strands.

Philip J. Ivanhoe's essay goes to painstaking lengths to make clear that two strands of contemporary feminism correspond to an ancient debate between Mencius and Xunzi regarding human nature and its mesh with Confucian thought. This is an ambitious essay that draws together aspects of the

thought of Mary Daly and Carol Gilligan. His remarks upon the *vocational virtue* model (page 64) could lead to a revision of our understanding of the relationship between feminist and Confucian thought. There is a free-flowing tone to this essay, which can be inviting, but also cautionary. The author states, "There is no end to history or to the challenge of being human" (page 68). Actually, there is, assuredly, an end to both. Once in a while sober-minded reminders of this fact serve as well deserved, if harsh, tonic. While trolling in deep waters, Ivanhoe's reminders are still perhaps important. East and West combined is a beautiful vision, but.

Hall and Ames announce on page 75 that they will not ". . . pretend that the Chinese culture is anything but sexist." They want to show, however, that this sexism is "culturally specific" (p. 75). This is a hard distinction to wrap your mind around. (At least it has been for me.) Chinese culture is sexist, but this, it is contended, is culturally specific, and therefore . . . okay? Is it being suggested that it is important to view through a globally democratic lens? The distinction between "sex and gender" plays a role here, but I remain unconvinced that despite the "richness" of their observations, they have finally made their case. This is a wide-ranging essay in which the authors discuss the vagina, infants, valleys, mothers, and other items that are carefully identified as metaphors. The essay will stimulate some readers, perhaps especially those who are interested in issues regarding sex, class, and gender.

Ingrid Shafer examines ecofeminism (see the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether) and its putative connections to Confucianism. Why Shafer regards Confucianism as "a religion" (page 97) is unclear. One can accept her references to "transcendence" and more, and yet accept Confucianism as a way of life rather than a religion. There is room for broad disagreement here, certainly. Linking ecofeminism to ". . . the exploitation of the natural world and the subordination of women" (p. 98) is potentially doctrinaire, religious. A strong sense of "the natural" runs through this essay, but that conception is subject to grave criticism. At this point in the volume, one wonders about the wisdom of distinguishing between ideology and other forms of philosophical engagement (Socratic, for example). Despite these comments, there are certainly things to learn here about Chinese thought as well as about feminism. The references at the end of the essay are extremely helpful to neophytes.

After reading Pauline C. Lee's impressive essay on Li Zhi and John Stuart Mill, one is left feeling that East/West dialog is indeed a realistic hope. She makes it clear that neither Li Zhi's nor Mill's conception of feminism is without blemish, but this very fact underscores the idea that both traditions can be tapped and placed into the service of contemporary conceptions of what is yet to be done if feminism and "religio-ideological" traditions that rule are to gel with the picture of modern life that is coagulating.

Goldin's essay is technical and addresses itself to very difficult questions regarding the actual role of women in China. As such, it is of interest to specialists and to those novices who are willing to read carefully her observations and follow up on the secondary literature.

Wawrytko's piece, "Prudery and Prurience: Historical Roots of the Confucian Conundrum Concerning Women, Sexuality, and Power" begins on a dogmatic note: "Paradigms associated with sexuality mirror gender relationships and the disposition of power within those relationships." (Page 163.) I didn't know this, nor is it argued for. Despite this, the essay is highly readable and has broad appeal because it references not only historical and archeological findings, but also philosophical grounds for various theses. She begins her conclusion thus: "A careful reading of

ancient Chinese sources demonstrates that the anti-feminist stance attributed to Confucian philosophy is both an oversimplification and a hasty generalization." (Page 186.) That might be the best thematic statement to characterize the entire volume.

The rationale behind the ordering of the essays is not especially clear. Nylan's piece, which comes ninth, concerns "elite" women during particular eras (dynasties) of Chinese history. Much of the essay has a narrative flow to it, which will appeal to many readers.

Lisa Raphals's essay, "Gender Virtue Reconsidered: Notes from the Warring States and Han," closes the volume. Raphals begins her essay on indisputable ground, viz., that both Western and Eastern writers have contended that there is a distinction between the sexes, and that, commonly enough, men have been judged superior. Some of the details here are highly technical, and there is no shortage of Chinese pictographs within the text. Like many of the essays in this fine volume, the concerns here are wide-ranging. Raphals closes her essay with this remark: "Nowadays, condemnation of "Confucian" patriarchy is a *sine qua non* for any attempt to reformulate Confucian values for the contemporary world. I have argued here that an ethic of gendered virtue is equally problematic in both Europe and China, yet appeals to it continue to be made in the interest of reform."

No better closing -- or opening, for that matter -- to this volume is possible.

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