

Confucianism and Feminism in Korean Context

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Abstract

This paper considers a recent claim that Confucianism and feminism are compatible since both are care ethics. I examine some aspects of contemporary care ethics and compare them with Confucian ethics from a feminist viewpoint. I argue that for Confucianism to be made compatible with feminism, the former must be transformed to the extent that it loses its main features.

Care ethics can be feminist ethics only when women have been made moral subjects because of their perceived ability to care for others. Caring in a Confucian culture is not as much a feminine value as a male value. I do not find Confucian ethics as care ethics to be particularly liberating for women. For Confucianism to be viable in a contemporary democratic world, it must be supplemented by feminist ethics that take justice and equality as the primary values.

There is growing interest in making Confucianism tenable in the West as well as in the East in contemporary contexts. Some propose Confucian ethics as an alternative to the liberal tradition in the West based on the atomistic conception of an individual and absolute freedom, and argue that the essential feature of Confucianism that casts off the historical contingencies of its application ensures the closure of the lacuna in Western liberalist ideals. Some even advocate that Confucianism is on the same side as feminism.

In this essay, I consider a recent claim that Confucianism and feminism are compatible, and an even more radical claim that Confucian feminism is possible. Li (1994) claimed that Confucianism – which is known for its characteristically patriarchal elements – and feminism are compatible on the basis of their key commonality, namely care ethics. I argue that for Confucianism to be made compatible with feminism, the former must be transformed to the extent that it loses its main features, and that if Confucianism is compatible with feminism in Li's sense, then any religion or philosophy that propounds certain humanistic values and principles is compatible with feminism regardless of how persistently and deeply it serves as ideology for antifeminist traditions.

For over 2,000 years, Confucianism has had considerable influence on virtually all segments of society in the Far East, including government, education, general value systems, and art. Even when certain religions such as Buddhism prevail in a society, Confucianism has provided the political and educational ideals. Confucianism is by no means a unified system of thought and values.

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That is, it has constantly developed to produce multiple schools of thought, among which neo-Confucianism, developed in the 11th and 12th centuries, is most conspicuous. However, it would be fair to say that various Confucian schools are based mainly on a relatively unified Confucian ideal that makes it enough to refer to them as a philosophical unity, that is, Confucianism.

It is worth noting that Confucianism has not only served as a philosophy but also functioned as a strong political ideology throughout the history of many cultures in the Far East, particularly during the Choson Dynasty, the last Korean dynasty that lasted over 500 years. It is also true that Confucianism is a living force as well as a reality for many people in Korea, providing the cultural foundation for their everyday lives. This aspect of Confucianism makes it difficult to evaluate Confucianism simply as a philosophy based on certain metaphysical and ethical values or principles apart from the concrete history of its applied influence on people's ordinary lives in a vast range of contexts. In addition, if that history is the history of oppression for certain categories of people (e.g., women and people of low social status), then one must ask the following: Is Confucianism directly or indirectly responsible for the unfolding of that history, and if so, how has it contributed to the justification of this oppression?

It is well known that Confucianism is characteristically patriarchal as a political ideology. It takes three bonds (*san-kang*, 三綱: the relationship between the father and the son; that between the ruler and the minister; and that between the husband and the wife) as the basic "net" of society. The word *kang* means the principal rope in a net to which other ropes are attached. Therefore, the father becomes the principal rope to which his son is attached, and the same is true between the ruler and the minister and between the husband and the wife. Here rulers, fathers, and husbands occupy a higher position than their counterparts in a metaphysical, moral, social, or legal sense.

Some may argue that the doctrine of three bonds was introduced during the late Han Dynasty, not during the time of Confucius and Mencius. Therefore, ancient Confucianism is claimed to be free of any antiegalitarian elements. However, even the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius presuppose the existence of a feudal system and a social hierarchy. Confucian ethics are basically the ethics of ministers and noblemen (*chun-tzu*, 君子) that advocate the politics of benevolence (*ren*, 仁) and righteousness (*i*, 義) in contrast to governance by laws and punishment. According to Confucius in *The Analects*, "A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it" (Confucius, 1963, 2.1: 22). Further, "Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrong-doing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (*li* 禮), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right" (Confucius, 1963, 2.3: 22).

Li argued that the essential aspect of the humanistic conception of *ren* under Confucianism as "benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, human-heartedness, humaneness, humanity, perfect virtue, goodness, true manhood, manhood at its best" (1994: 72) can be separated from the general historical context of its application and from the patriarchal norms of morality as they are represented in various rules of propriety constituting a feudal political system based on patriarchy, and thus that Confucius and Mencius, the proponents of the philosophy of *ren*, are not responsible for its history of oppressing women. However, I do not see how a certain philosophy can be free from the history of its application, particularly when it has served as a moral and political ideology for justifying a hierarchical social system and the oppression of certain groups of people throughout its history. This case is not the same as that of the ancient Athenians, who believed in democracy but acknowledged slavery because the former was not used as an ideology to justify the latter. If Christian doctrines served as an ideology for justifying racial discrimination or democracy, for justifying slavery, then either Christianity or democracy would not be free from being responsible for its history of oppression. The Confucian principle

of humanity has not only been applied to women, as claimed by Li, but also been used to justify the oppressive rule of propriety (*li*, 禮) for women as the Way of Heaven or the truth of humanity. The problem with the concept of *ren* is that it has not been clearly defined in Confucian contexts. Although it is generally agreed that *ren* is akin to love, compassion, humanity, or human-heartedness in an abstract sense, Confucius always explained this concept through concrete contexts and examples, sometimes employing different terms depending on his students. Li claims that it is this form of particularism responding to individuals' particular needs that gives strength to Confucianism as care ethics.

...he [Confucius] gave different answers to different people asking the same question because he took into consideration concrete situations (*Analects* 11.22). On the other hand, care ethicists, particularly those who believe in care with gradations, have to deal with people in such close relationships as parent-child, husband-wife, friends and neighbors. A caring person has to take into consideration these different types of relationships or "roles" in order to care in an appropriate and effective way. It can be argued that one cannot care well without understanding the differences between these relationships. The way one cares about one's children is somewhat different from the way one cares about one's parents, and the way one cares about one's parents can be different from the way one cares about other elderly people, as they are each particular individuals (Li, 1994: 134).

In criticizing Li, Star (2002: 78–80, 95–98) argued that Confucian ethics are not particularistic because they focus more on the care required for special social roles than on individuals' diverse and particular needs in the real world. In Confucian ethics, caring is typified in accordance with social roles. Therefore, in a strict sense, Confucian ethics are not care ethics but virtue ethics that emphasize character traits such as filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and brotherly love and the development of good character traits based on a communal understanding of virtue and personhood. Rebutting this criticism, Li claimed that Confucian ethics are role-based care ethics based on the concept of *ren* and can be meaningful to feminist ethics. However, how are the roles of people in a society defined? In a traditional society, it is *li* (rules of propriety), not *ren*, that defines specific roles of people according to their social status. As long as Confucian ethics focus on roles, they cannot be free from moral norms handed down from the patriarchal and hierarchical traditions of the past. One may create new roles for women, but this cannot be done all at once out of nothing. New roles are made within a certain context inherited from the past. Therefore, it is inconsistent for Li to insist that both role-based care ethics and *ren* ethics (with new forms of *li*) hold for both men and women.

If a specific type of care is required according to a particular type of social role in a Confucian value system, then caring may not always be spontaneous or truthful to an individual's genuine needs. When an individual is in need of care, he or she wants to be cared for as a whole person, not as a teacher or a mother, that is, not as an individual with some predefined social role that may represent some superficial part of him or herself. In this sense, Confucian ethics are care ethics based on group norms defined by the general social roles of groups, whereas Gilligan's care ethics are ethics based on norms for individuals. This difference has important implications for feminist ethics because Confucian ethics depend heavily on general normative rules and principles of the past that prescribe social roles, whereas contemporary care ethics depend on individuals' particular needs.

With respect to Li's point regarding *ren*, it is important to note that the concept of *ren* closely reflects the rules of propriety (*li*)—in fact, one may say that *ren* is the internalized virtue of *li* and *li* is the external expression of *ren*—and is usually illustrated through a focus on the Confucian values of filial piety and brotherly respect as well as conscientiousness, altruism, and trust. According to

Confucius, “To master oneself and return to propriety (*li*) is humanity (*ren*)” (Confucius, 1963, 12.1: 38), and “Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is not disrespectful to superiors and yet creates disorder....Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity” (Confucius, 1963, 1.2: 19–20).

Here two philosophical points are involved: First, to the extent that *ren* is not defined independently of the concept of *li* (rules of propriety), which is time-dependent and essential for distinguishing (mostly on a hierarchical basis) between people, particularly between the haves and the have-nots and between men and women, Confucianism is responsible for the history of oppressing women because the vastly diverse rules of propriety are what made this history possible. In various cultures in the Far East, the rules of propriety (as concrete moral guidelines and lessons for what should be done in certain contexts for certain individuals with certain filial or social roles) have functioned as laws in practice because of the political ideal of governing by virtue (禮治), not by law (法治). Individuals have been punished and deprived of social privileges under the name of propriety (*li*) because of their lives within a society of maximum morality. Indeed, the concept of propriety law (*li-fa*, 禮法) represents this aspect of the Confucian culture.

Second, the Confucian concept of *ren* presupposes the existence of a large patriarchal family in which the father (the elder ordered through complex and consanguineous family relations) and male members have higher status than the mother, younger members (the elder and younger members are determined not only based on their ages but also on the order of family relations), and female members. Without the family system, the context of its realization cannot be found. Li noted that “[a] person of *Ren* must love first his father and elder brothers and then, by extension, other people. Mencius said: “Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then by extension, also the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then by extension, also the young of other families” (Li, 1994: 79). In the Confucian context, most moral norms are laid out in the context of family and social relations, and therefore a man or a woman outside family relations does not have an opportunity to become a moral individual. Marriage has traditionally been very important to men and women, particularly to women, because they are expected to have no social relations outside the family. However, even unmarried men are considered a scandal for their family and one of the worst forms of disrespect for their parents. Morality is not a matter of the autonomous determination of one’s own will but of the fulfilment of one’s moral responsibility for others in certain relations (or in more euphoric words, caring for others).

These family- and relationship-centered ethics have long discriminated against women because the family is characteristically patriarchal and social relations are hierarchically ordered through male relations. Even in contemporary society, at least in Korea, where relational ethics remain, closely-knit social relations among men represent one of the biggest barriers for women interested in business careers or politics. Despite the election in 2012 of a woman as the new President, the number of female politicians and bureaucrats is shamefully low in Korea (much lower than in countries with a similar level of economic development). Many employers shun women because they believe that women have fewer social connections relevant to business than men. In addition, male employees often feel ill at ease working with their female colleagues because they are not used to treating women as their equals. They are brought up to view women as different beings (often only as potential bearers of their children). For example, there is an old saying that one must not sit together with someone of the opposite sex after the age of seven.

One may argue that *ren* (as a cardinal moral virtue) can be made viable without presupposing a patriarchal family system and that a new form of Confucianism can be developed. However, for Confucianism to shed its context of the family structure in which it has been applied, it must lose

one of its distinctively “Confucian” characteristics, namely the system of three bonds (*san-kang*, 三綱) and five relationships (*wu lun*, 五倫). Any ethics grounded in the moral ideal of *ren* as the general value of benevolence, humanity, or care would not be very different from other types of ethics that focus on general moral values such as benevolence, love, affection, altruism, and care. Without filial piety (孝) and brotherly respect (悌), which require an ordered family system, *ren* would be reduced to simple affection or care for significant others. The main proposition of Confucian ethics would then be “love your family members first and then extend the love to others related to you.” This would be a proposition of relational ethics, such as the formulation proposed by Noddings (1984). Confucian ethics, unlike contemporary relational ethics, do not propose simple love for family members or significant others. Instead, they emphasize hierarchical love for others classified according to their social roles. Loving relations are not mutual but defined in accordance with different roles that people play in a social hierarchy or a family network. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways to express love and care. In many cases, emotions and particular methods of caring modelled for specific roles are almost forced upon people in those roles. Through implicit and explicit moral education, one comes to understand how one should care for others according to their social roles and positions. In general, languages in the Far East depend heavily on complex words and expressions of respect whose use varies according to hierarchical relations in the family and the society. This is particularly true in the case of the Korean language because, among the countries in the Far East, Korea has been influenced the most by Confucianism.

However, one may argue that a new form of Confucianism can be made to ignore the hierarchy of the traditional family and society and thus that Confucian ethics can be made into care ethics that are compatible with feminist ethics. Li argued that Confucianism has a lot in common with feminist care ethics, suggesting that both base their morality on non-contractual relationships, concrete care situations, and specific rules of behavior, not on contractual relationships between independent individuals, justice, and universal principles. He claimed that the reason why Confucianism has taken part in the oppression of women is that Confucians have “excluded women from the domain of the practice of *ren* because they did not believe that women are as fully persons as men are” (Li, 1994: 84). However, it is not clear whether the fact that Confucianism has a lot in common with feminist care ethics shows that Confucianism can be made compatible with feminism by that account. For Confucianism also has a lot in common with the ethics that strongly supports patriarchy and antifeminism. In addition, Star (2002) argued that Confucian ethics are not care ethics (and thus not feminist ethics) but virtue ethics based on role relationships between people. Li replied that Confucian ethics are “role-based care” ethics and thus that there can be various forms of care ethics. However, I contend that Confucian role-based care ethics are not compatible with feminist ethics because roles in a Confucian society are strictly defined within a finely-knit social system reflecting its hierarchy and patriarchy (Li, 2002)

It is not far-fetched to claim that Confucian ethics are care ethics in a broad sense. However, not all care ethics reflect feminist ethics. In many cultures in the Far East, Confucian ethics (as care ethics) are generally male ethics, as also indicated by Li. A man of *ren* is a man often referred to as a superior man (*chun-tzu*, 君子), not a small man (*xiaoren*, 小人), and has more power to care for others (i.e., to do *ren*) than a small man. Both caring for others and being cared for are the privileges of superior men. As a father cares for his wife and children, a Confucian king is expected to care for all his subjects. Women are expected to care for others but not those outside the family and are cared for only when they are located within the boundary of family and marital relations. When a son’s wife cares for parents-in-law in the name of filial piety, they are considered to lead successful lives. Moral sensitivity in a Confucian society heavily depends on hierarchical relations. People develop different moral attitudes toward others depending on their social and familial hierarchies.

It is noted that women are less likely to be conscious of the social hierarchy, even though it plays a critical role in a Confucian culture, and therefore they are more likely to develop a sense of equality among themselves. Relationships between individuals of the same sex are more intimate in the Far East than in the West because sexual segregation has been widely practiced, resulting in a sexually segregated society for many groups of individuals, including junior/high school and even university students. Although men also have intimate social relationships, they are more likely to be conscious of the familial or the social hierarchies. If there is a hierarchy among women, then it is their male partners or family members who usually determine the hierarchical order.

The male orientation of Confucian culture brings about the moral subordination of women to men. Women are not supposed to have moral autonomy because they are bound to their narrowly defined roles in family relations, such as being a daughter, a wife, a mother, or a daughter-in-law. The moral subordination of women is epitomized in the concept of the three ways of following (三從之道) for women in Korea's traditional society: throughout their lives, women must follow firstly their fathers, secondly their husbands, and thirdly their sons.

The moral ability to do *ren* or care for others is generally attributed to men, and in a neo-Confucian context, it is identified as the virtue of the universe to generate all things. A man of *ren* is a man who is able to unite with the universe. Confucians believe that small men and women are seriously defective in this ability, although they note that small men can become superior men through moral efforts. Therefore, it is inconsistent to claim that Confucian care ethics are compatible with feminist ethics in a culture where the ability to care for others (as a type of moral ability) is considered a distinctive characteristic of some men. Not all forms of care ethics are made feminist only by being care ethics. Feminist ethics must allow for raising women's consciousness as women and even liberate them from certain forms of oppression. Gilligan's care ethics have facilitated an environment in which women can be assured of their moral ability as well as their superiority in that ability. Care ethics can be feminist ethics only when women have been made moral subjects because of their perceived ability to care for others. Caring in a Confucian culture is not as much a feminine value as a male value. I do not find Confucian ethics (as care ethics for men) to be particularly liberating for women and do not see how Confucianism can be made compatible with feminism under the name of care ethics.

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I now address the question of how feminist ethics can be envisioned in the Confucian tradition, from which it is difficult for those in the Far East to separate because this tradition is deeply entrenched in their cultures. I claim that in a Confucian culture, justice-centered ethics can properly function as feminist ethics. Lacking broad social connections and facing disadvantages, women in social arenas are more likely to be conscious of the imperatives of justice in contrast to men who enjoy privileges from their broad range of social connections. Feminist ethics in a Confucian society must take equality, fairness, and individuality as the primary values to remedy the injustice incurred by the long tradition of patriarchal Confucian ideology. If Confucian feminism is possible, Confucianism must extend itself to incorporate justice ethics.

Not all forms of justice ethics are feminist ethics as not all forms of care ethics are feminist. Justice ethics can be made feminist depending on the way they address women's questions. Dealing with the various forms of oppression and discrimination in a Confucian society requires the ethics that pay attention to equality and the mutual recognition that is free from hierarchies of any kind. Women who are compelled to care for others to the point of themselves being deprived of an opportunity to be cared for (even by themselves) should be more aware of their own rights and needs. If Confucianism is to be made compatible with feminism, then it is only when the Confucian ethic is supplemented by this awareness of the position of women and small men. Even Gilligan

and Noddings noted that for women to be morally developed, they must care for themselves and be aware of their own needs and rights:

When the concern with care extends from an injunction not to hurt others to an ideal responsibility in social relationships, women begin to see their understanding of relationships as a source of moral strength. But the concept of rights also changes women's moral judgments by adding a second perspective to the consideration of moral problems, with the result that judgment becomes more tolerant and less absolute (Gilligan, 1982: 149).

The ethical self is an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal self as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself. As I care for others and am cared for by them, I become able to care for myself (Noddings, 1984: 49).

Unless women have opportunities to be cared for and thus to care for themselves, caring is not an ethical ideal but simply an element of slave ethics. For Confucianism to be viable in a contemporary democratic world, it must be supplemented by feminist ethics as justice ethics. Care ethics generally practiced in a Confucian society such as Korea are male ethics that take men be the sole moral agent in a full-fledged sense. The social reality for women in a contemporary Confucian society still remains vague because of the long shadow of Confucianism as a patriarchal institution that reinforces biological determinism and the moral heteronomy of women.

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