

Wan-Li Ho

Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan
St. Petersburg, Fla.: Three Pines Press, 2016 (ISBN 9781931483339)

Reviewed by Jea Sophia Oh, 2018

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Approaching environmental ethics from the context of women's movements and philosophy, Wan-Li Ho, a Taiwanese scholar, offers the unique standpoint of "ecofamilism." Instead of using the Western theoretical models of ecofeminism, Ho offers "ecofamilism" as a theoretical platform for thinking through environmental movements. Ho's *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan* reads like a brilliant interwoven tapestry of diverse interdisciplinary methodologies and religious cultural elements such as ecology, women's and gender studies, ethics, postcolonial studies, Taiwan studies, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Christianity.

Ho coherently organizes her book by clearly distinguishing "ecofamilism" from "ecofeminism" as juxtaposed standpoints. She opts to avoid using the term *ecofeminism* to discuss feminism in Taiwan. A basic presupposition motivating this move is the fact that Taiwanese culture cannot be identified with or assimilated into familiar paradigms undergirding Western ethical and political cultures. Quite profoundly, her refusal relates to the Western feminist essentializing assumptions about the connections between femininity and the earth--and the victimization of women and nature among Western ecofeminists. Ho criticizes Sherry B. Ortner's ecofeminist theory as indicative of a dichotomous understanding of female/male, nature/culture. According to Ho, Ortner iterates a female:nature and male:culture conceptual dichotomy (and implicit valorization). Despite recognizing the important theoretical contributions of Western ecofeminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, and Karen Warren in terms of rethinking the deep connections between human and nonhuman nature, and going beyond traditional doctrines, Ho still opts to think outside of the ecofeminist paradigm.

How then is ecofamilism different from ecofeminism? Ho argues that the label "feminism" might function to prevent men from participating in recognizable women's work as soft-line environmental activism. With a dynamic Confucian notion of family

that includes all genders and isn't bound to a rigid hierarchy of gender roles, Ho situates self-cultivation of benevolence (*ren* 仁) in herself and then critically expands that notion to family, community, nature, and cosmic fields of agency. Her expansive notion of family overcomes gender dichotomies and deconstructs anthropocentric boundaries with the goal of realizing a flourishing planetary macrocosm. Her critical notion of ecofamilism sees humans as a part of the web of life and the entirety of humanity as an integrated body. She develops this encompassing ecological vision in part by drawing upon the neo-Confucian thinker Zhang Zai: "That which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature" (27).

Operating from within her own Confucian culture, Ho recognizes the earth as an extended family and as an open-ended, dynamic system processing over generations and evolving over time. Considering the earth as an expanded family can also be found in the Greek etymology of "ecology" and "economy" as *oikos*, meaning household. Ecology then is the *logos* of managing the household of living organisms. The ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague argues in her *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* that a nonpatriarchal economy is implicit in the *oikos*, the *household* of which we are part of the living body of God (McFague 2001, 183). And the "we" here does not mean only humankind, but rather the cosmos as a whole organic unity.

The concepts of both *household* and *family* have been employed by patriarchal systems of oppression in Eastern and Western cultures to subordinate women. The patriarchal dimensions of household management serve to promote male members of families as the heads of the household and maintain primary power and predominance in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control and distribution of family property. In East Asian Confucian societies, there is a legacy of traditionally patrilineal family order, by which titles and rituals are inherited by male family lineage. The central Confucian virtues of family are filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and family harmony (*jiahe* 家和), but historically these have been misogynistically practiced. In such a gender hierarchy, a woman's roles in a family are at various times conceived to be subordinated to those of her father, husband, and brothers.

Despite all these concerns, Ho creatively uses traditional Confucian family values as her conceptual framework to construct her new theoretical framework of ecofamilism. Ho emphasizes obedience and compassion as virtues of ecofamilism that should be extended to familial care of strangers and even enemies. Although Ho criticizes the dualistic essentialism of ecofeminism in terms of the linkage of nature and women, she also calls ecofamilists "nurturing mothers" and introduces "the motherly virtues" of self-sacrifice and nurturance in relation to the Buddhist concept of the "Bodhisattva path" (50). Nevertheless, compassion and obedience are often required for women only as genderized concepts by which women's sacrifice can be justified in the interest of family harmony--but who is doing the deciding as to what counts as viable modes of realizing family harmony? In this regard, it might be hard to defend the claim that her ecofamilism is decidedly nonessentialist in terms of theorizing gender roles. Unlike some early ecofeminists whom Ho is right to criticize, more recent trends in ecofeminist criticism

eschew such essentialism and instead focus more on the transectionality of women-men-nature-culture as an entangled web of semiotic density operating within a symbiotic body.

Ho carried out extensive research on six environmental activist groups in Taiwan over the course of two decades from 1990 to 2015. Unlike in patriarchal families, the members of these environmental activist groups are predominantly housewives who are the leaders of their communities. Ho conceives of the role of "activist housewives" as expanding "the boundaries of home and family to include the ecological environment, broadening the scope of traditional familial duties along the lines of ecofamilism" (90). Ho's contextual approach challenges two relatively firmly entrenched stereotypes. The first is regarding the very idea of "feminism"--although the term *feminism* cannot be identified solely with white feminism, it has historically been a white-dominated discourse throughout the three long waves of feminist movements. Many iterations of Western feminisms have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle-class, and college-educated perspectives. Ho boldly refuses to use the term *feminism* and presents a new, multilayered, deeper, and wider wave of her own distinctively Taiwanese version of "ecofamilism."

Another challenge is to the stereotypical conception of "family" as part of her cultural background and social structure. Despite destructive practices of patriarchal family around the world, Ho's extended and expanded notion of family applies Confucian love (*ren* 仁), Buddhist compassion (*cibei* 慈悲), Daoist *yin-yang* thinking, and Christian stewardship of creation to develop a more-than-human world including poor humans, animals, and even fish as a symbiotic cosmic family in which human males are not excluded in the healing work and mending processes. Her more inclusive version of family has no inherent, disabling boundaries such as nationalism, androcentrism, or anthropocentrism but expands rather toward an enabling conception of planetary community as an interwoven whole. Her distinctive vision of ecofamilism can be succinctly summarized as being about creating a unified Taiwanese ecological ethic, which combines Western ecological thought with ancient ecological wisdom, including ideas from aboriginal tribes (92).

In addition to the three Rs: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" in the US recycling campaign, as a part of her ecological ethic Ho introduces a fourth R by adding "Recover" as an integral part of the Taiwanese recycling movement (92). This idea of recovery would seem to be rather similar to the Korean *Salim* (enlivening) movement ongoing since 1997: an ecological resistance movement in South Korea initiated by the destructive results of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. When the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and South Korea negotiated the then-largest ever rescue package in early December 1997--approximately US \$57 billion--it came as a shock to Koreans as it came with devastating austerity policies. The situation became popularly known as the "IMF crisis." Confronting the IMF crisis, the *salim* movement is carried out predominantly by Korean women in the everyday practice of caring for their homes. The *salim* movement in Korea is a recycling movement that engages in the practices of *ah-na-ba-da*. *Ah-na-ba-da* stands for saving (*ah*), sharing (*na*), exchanging (*ba*), and reusing (*da*). The *salim*

movement functions as an ecological movement by focusing on saving both the economy and the environment: together seen as a valuable *oikos*, our living organism, the household (Oh 2011, 36). Recovering is an important activity of recycling as it aids in healing and mending creation. In this sense, Ho's ecofamilism is not just a theory nor an activist movement alone, but rather part of a holistic, transforming paradigm based on changes in perspective. She combines recovering with the theologically laden idea of "repentance" (94) aimed at efforts to reflect on an environmental crisis that is the result of people's greed. In my *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West*, I introduce *salim* as a postcolonial ecofeminist movement (Oh 2011). Beyond a narrow meaning of *salim* as women's household tasks, a concept that could easily be degraded along with the women to whom it normally applies, *salim* in a broad sense means all activities that are directed toward sustainable planetary living, including recycling, recovering, reconciliation, repentance, and responsibility. In the anthology *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies recognize that ecofeminism has always driven women's efforts to save their livelihood and make their communities safe, as we have seen in such movements as the *Chipko* movement in India in the 1970s, which was led primarily by women who embraced trees to protect them from being cut by loggers and struggled to create life-affirming societies (Mies and Shiva 2014).

Ho's *Ecofamilism* provides us an extremely valuable and innovative theoretical model to do creative work in women's and gender studies. Her culturally contextualized observations serve to embolden and legitimate women's leadership roles in environmental movements by offering concrete examples and critical analysis of particular religious communities led by exemplary women engaging in environmentally significant work. Her interdisciplinary and interreligious approach creates a refreshing conceptual space for thinking through a postcolonial ecofamilism distinctive from dominant trends in historically Western ecofeminism. Although she does not use the word "postcolonial" due to her deeply non-Western and gender-inclusive outlook, this designation is fitting for her comparative perspective. Moreover, many current thinkers working in the field of postcolonial ecofeminism are not only talking about non-Western feminism, but are also developing critical theoretical tools and strategies to better address the task of decolonizing nature from humans' destructive, neoliberal, capitalist colonization in this Anthropocene epoch. By all means then, we need to hear more women's voices, especially non-Western and marginalized voices, aimed at decolonizing this planet. Called by many names--ecofeminism, postcolonial ecofeminism, ecofamilism, and so on--ecologically healing women's movements are more important than ever before as we stand on the brink of climate catastrophe. In 1996, Rosemary Radford Ruether offered *Women Healing Earth*, an anthology of women's voices from Latin America, Asia, and Africa on religion, ecology, and feminism as an effort at cross-cultural communication and solidarity between women throughout the world struggling against the effects of Western colonization (Ruether 1996, 1). Alongside these continuing critical conversations between the East and the West, "this family-oriented approach of ecofamilism can certainly help us to engage more productively with traditions of social activism and ecofeminism, increasing the richness of ideas and broadening the appeal of environmental movements worldwide," as Ho concludes her book (184).

References

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