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# Learned Women, “Leftover” Women, and “The Third Sex”

## Women’s Learning in the Confucian Tradition and Contemporary China

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### Abstract

This paper investigates women’s learning experiences in the Confucian tradition and the social dismay and stigma associated with them. Despite being considered a meta-virtue in the Confucian tradition, learning becomes rather complex when women are the learners. It is viewed by learned women as a curse rather than a blessing in pre-modern China; it is associated with the stigma of “leftover women” and “the third sex” in contemporary China. Based on an examination of works written by women thinkers, I argue that the asymmetry in social recognition for men’s and women’s learning is rooted in the social and family structure of *nei* (in) and *wai* (out), which does not assign sufficient cultural and moral significance to learning achieved in the *nei* domain nor permit its continuous and accumulative existence. I propose two preliminary steps to rectify the issue of the lack of social and moral recognition of women’s learning: first, a reforming of the *nei* and *wai* structure to allow assigning more moral, cultural, and normative significance to affairs in the *nei* domain. Second, re-examine and utilize classical Confucian texts such as the *Mencius* and later works by women writers to support and guide such reformations.

### The significance of learning

In this paper, I explore how Confucianism can better help and guide women in societies where it remains a major influence. More specifically, I discuss one of the most important activities or meta-virtues in Confucianism—learning. Moral cultivation and learning are crucial to both Confucian ethical theory and practices. *The Analects* of Confucius opens by asking “Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals” (Lau 1998, 59)? Learning, despite its clear theoretical significance in the Confucian tradition, becomes increasingly complex when women are the learners. While the ideals of “women moral exemplars” and “moral sages” seem attainable in optimistic interpretations of the Confucian texts, learning is viewed by learned women

as a curse rather than a blessing in pre-modern China. In today's China, education does not always result in respect and social recognition for women as it does for men. This paper explores, using the key Confucian texts and the *Confucian Four Books for Women*, the issues revolving women's learning. I point out that, in order for Confucianism to be helpful to women in the future, we must reform certain structures that are foundational to the Confucian tradition, such as the realms that correlate with the social roles assigned to women and men.

## Women and Confucianism

### *Insights and pitfalls from the Confucian tradition*

The Confucian tradition is sometimes known as a rich resource in support of women's development. Any ethical theory that places great importance on emotional responses can benefit greatly from the Confucian tradition's abundant resources on the cultivating and managing of emotions. *Ren*, the highest ethical achievement and virtue in Confucian philosophy, is closely related to care and filial love between children and parents. For this reason, a number of writers have contributed to a debate surrounding the idea that care ethics—a prominent approach in feminist ethics—shares some common ground and even a similar approach with Confucian philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its potential for feminist ethics, Confucianism's idea of personhood also helps to challenge the rational, essential self that is common in Western philosophy. The Confucian tradition views personhood as flexible and in a constant process of change; furthermore, it considers the individual's roles in family and society as relational. As Karyn Lai points out, the concept of “a situated self”—as opposed to an abstract and universal idea of self—has recently attracted the attention of many scholars working in the area of feminist theory. Lai suggests that the Confucian relational understanding of personhood supports this conception; she writes, “a person's identity may only be fully understood in terms of how he or she stands in relation to significant others. In this way, the Confucian self is a concrete, located self” (Lai 2016, 111–12). Confucianism's non-fundamentalist approach to understanding the self and personhood makes it a natural ally of feminist theories, which oppose the approach to understanding personhood in traditional philosophy.

This non-fundamentalist approach to personhood leads to another point: Confucian philosophy does not support the idea that women are *inherently* weaker than or inferior to men. Women in the Confucian tradition are constrained to the domestic sphere due to the particularities of their gendered social roles—not because their physical or intellectual potential is in anyway inferior to that of a man. A woman can be as educated as a man; she does not *lack* the capacity to learn. Examples from Chinese history suggest that, in certain circumstances, when a male family member is absent, a woman can take a leading role in the family—provided their doing so aligns with Confucian virtues, such as filial piety. Disney's popular adaptation of the story of Mulan, a girl who enlists in the army out of filial piety to her old father, is one such example. Mulan had no brothers who could enlist and wanted to save her father from the draft as he was too old to fight. In other words, women's physical and intellectual capacities are not thought of as constraints on their development—in Confucian philosophy women are not the “weaker sex.”

This is very different than the Aristotelian tradition, which proposes that women lack certain rational capacities and assumes that their inferior social position is determined by their biological sex. Conversely, Confucian thinkers are often considered quite supportive of women's moral development; this is especially true of Mencius,

given his emphasis on the emotive and intuitive side of human nature and human development, and his proclamation that our moral potential resides in seemingly basic emotional responses. Many Confucian female thinkers such as Madam Liu (~sixteenth century) and Yunjidang Im (1721–93), inspired by Mencius, argue that women have equal moral potential to men. The reason is straightforward—women and men are not that different when it comes to basic emotional responses of compassion or shame (see H.-K. Kim 2016; S. Kim 2014).

Despite this rosy picture, the Confucian tradition is also associated with the suppression of women in history. Female infanticide, foot-binding, and the celebration of women's suicide over their imposed chastity are deeply connected to the cultural phenomenon of which Confucian thought is a large part. Many people today would equate Confucianism with the ideologies and traditional cultural practices that are responsible for the oppression of women throughout Chinese history and would therefore reject Confucianism all together. However, the consensus in the fields of feminism and Confucian studies seems to be that certain forms of Confucianism support the equal treatment of women and some of its philosophical insights could be useful to feminist theorists, particularly those gleaned from *The Confucian Four Books for Women*, a set of historical texts devoted to women's teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> However, if we look into the practice of Confucianism, the history of the Chinese civilization (like many others) is deeply sexist. Though some scholars try to disentangle sexist social structures and practices, such as foot-binding and female infanticide, from Confucian philosophy (or at least classical Confucian philosophy), it remains in question whether such disentanglement is really possible in both theory and practice.

Lisa Rosenlee (2006) insightfully points out that, in the history of China, Confucianism is sometimes a scapegoat for sexist, suppressive institutions, politics, and power structures (121). If in overthrowing the patriarchy we simply target Confucianism—as happened in the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–76), during which one of the main slogans used by the revolutionaries was to “takedown the Confucian shop”—we may take down the philosophical and cultural tradition while leaving largely intact the structure and institutions that are responsible for the suppression of women (Rosenlee 2006).<sup>3</sup>

While I agree with Rosenlee's points that Confucianism has been a scapegoat in the recent history of China and many people simply use it to refer to anything that is old, traditional, and oppressive, I would add that some Confucian scholars have not only made justifications for this oppressive hierarchy but also attempted to normalize it. Even if, in theory, we can neatly disentangle Confucian philosophical thought from cultural and ideological sexism, we need to take a closer look at the lives of women who are part of the Confucian tradition to understand the various forms in which such sexist structure affects their lives. Feminist thinkers outside of the tradition are free to pick and choose the tools of the Confucian tradition they find most useful, discarding the rest, unlike Confucian women who have different views or experiences of their tradition as it relates to feminism.

### *Unfair burden on women in non-Eurocentric culture*

Appreciating Confucianism's longstanding influence on women's plight is not possible without a careful examination of certain social issues prevalent in the East Asian culture today, where Confucianism is often portrayed as an equivalent to conservative and traditional values. Many modern women simply reject Confucianism and all of its

resulting values without much thought. However, nowadays in China, Korea, and Japan—cultures under strong and consistent Confucian influence—there is a strong need for a local ideology and philosophy that celebrates woman’s strength and growth. Rosenlee (2016) criticizes the idea of using Eurocentric feminism as the model to “liberate” or “save” the women in other traditions—“And surely under this purview, no one is capable of being a bearer of a non-Western culture and being a feminist of some sort at the same time. It is indeed ironic to say that women in the non-Western world can only be saved if their inferior culture identity is beaten out of them” (2016, 161). She further convincingly states that “to reorganize one’s culture by integrating new patterns of practice is always possible, but to strip one’s culture all away is simply unthinkable” (161).

Rosenlee’s warning has practical implications. Due to the complex entrenchment of Confucianism in different institutions and various social practices, women who try to maintain their culture while also fighting for their own rights and well-being—two goals that often conflict—are placed in a vulnerable position. However, it should not be the responsibility of individuals with limited philosophical and theoretical resources to disentangle sexist practices from their cultural practices, which are themselves enmeshed in a complex system of values. This places women in an indefensible position where they have not only to fight for their rights but also fight against the value system of their culture.

The need for reformed Confucian ethics thus comes from two directions; the need for a feminist theory that enables women to make sense of their experiences, which are embedded in their culture and tradition; and the need for the traditions that developed in a patriarchal and agriculture-based economic society to adapt and re-invent themselves to conform with gender equality, among other contemporary issues. Through the lens of modern-day Confucian theory, this paper aims to address some of the moral dilemmas that women in the Confucian tradition face today. I argue that Confucian philosophy should provide ethical guidance to women regarding their moral development and provide resources to help resolve contemporary normative/practical moral dilemmas, such as the social devaluation of women who achieve success in the public sphere.

### Moral development and achievement for women

This section discusses the possibility of a Confucian philosophy that promotes women’s well-being and development. I use moral cultivation and moral learning as the criteria to draw out the potential theoretical benefits and setbacks that come from using Confucianism to help and guide women. Moral cultivation and learning are the most important criteria in the Confucian-Mencian philosophical tradition. Those who successfully cultivate their moral qualities are viewed as exemplary persons or sages—the ultimate achievement of a person; whereas those who lack moral development are sometimes considered as subhuman and are the subject of social condemnation.

### Moral potential

The Confucian-Mencian tradition is famous for its emphasis on moral cultivation on both theoretical and practical levels. Mencius maintains that all people have innate moral potentials or the four beginnings of virtues. These are the hearts of *ceyin* (compassion/commiseration), *xiuwu* (a sense of shame), *cirang* (deference), and *shifei* (right and wrong). These sprouts are to be understood as both moral potentials and moral inclinations that would grow into more mature virtues of *ren* (benevolence,

humaneness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety, observance of rites), and *zhi* (wisdom). Because all people have these four hearts, they also have inclinations towards moral goodness. This means that the individual is on a continual journey towards a moral ideal. Mencius further claims that, given proper cultivation, anyone can become a morally exemplary person and even a moral sage. Mencius states that “we and the sage are of the same kind. ... What is it that hearts prefer in common? I say that it is order and righteousness. The sages first discovered what our hearts prefer in common” (*Mencius* 6A7, trans. Van Norden 2008). He claims the difference between sages and the average person lies in the level of cultivation of these moral potentials and that the sages simply discovered, before everyone else, what the four hearts prefer. Mencius’ assertion about human moral potential is encouraging not only to women but also people from different social classes, as well as anyone who might be considered “morally hopeless” because of their limited capacities.

Claims like “everyone has the heart of *ceyin*” (2A6) sound reassuring to the women readers of Mencian texts, as they suggest that becoming a sage rests on one’s basic emotional responses—*ceyin*, *xiuwu*, *cirang*, and *shifei* all have an affective component.<sup>4</sup> Further, while Mencius does not explicitly say that both men and women possess these moral potentials, in several passages he describes a women’s emotional response as the manifestation of one’s heart/mind (*xin*). For example, 4B33 of Mencius describes the reactions of a wife and concubine who discover that their husband begged for the leftovers of the sacrifices at the tombs instead of providing for the family in a respectable way. The wife tells the concubine “a husband is somebody you look up to for the rest of your life. And now he turns out to be like this!’ So she and the concubine cursed their husband and broke down crying in the courtyard...” (4B33) (Van Norden 2008). The husband’s behavior brings shame to the wife and concubine; their tears demonstrate that they have a better sense of morality than their husband. Mencius goes further to claim: “As a gentleman sees it, it is seldom the case that the manner in which people seek wealth, rank, profit, and success would not shame their wife and concubines and make them break down in tears if they knew about it” (4B33) (Van Norden 2008). According to Mencius, the wife and concubine possess a good sense of shame—not only would they feel shame for overstepping their own moral duties, they further feel shame for the husband’s wrongdoing.

Other early Confucian texts attest to women’s moral potential as well. In *Han Shi Wai Zhuan* (dated to around 150 BCE), a collection of anecdotes that inspire readers to follow Confucian teaching, Mencius is frequently depicted as a filial and sometimes confused son who seeks moral advice from his mother, who always appears to have a better understanding of morality.<sup>5</sup> Mencius’s mother has long been respected as an exemplary virtuous woman on the basis of her own virtues, as well as her raising Mencius to become an outstanding moral sage.

One may rightly point out that women, either as wife or mother, are used as tools to either shame or educate men in the above-mentioned texts; they are not discussed as the subject of moral education or cultivation. Mencius 4B33 merely points out that *even* women would feel shame at the idea of a man begging for the leftovers of a sacrifice ceremony; how then is it possible for this man to withstand his own moral failure? Nonetheless, it is clear from the Confucian texts that women were not denied education or cultivation on account of their lack of moral potential or moral capacity.

Historically, a number of female Confucian thinkers investigated the subject of women’s moral potential—these thinkers ask whether they, or any woman, can become Confucian moral sages. Their findings seem rather optimistic. They determined that women’s lack of education and their lack of access to the Confucian classics were the

main obstacles to women's moral development. The solutions these female thinkers proposed were thus very straightforward—they composed a number of Confucian books specifically for women readers, which could serve as the textbooks. Most notably, they authored the aforementioned *Confucian Four Books for women*, which were modeled after the Confucian classic *Four Books* (Sishū, they are: *Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great Learning*, *The Analects*, and *The Mencius*)—introductory texts that every Confucian student is expected to learn, which illustrate the core values and belief systems of Confucianism. These female thinkers conclude that women not only have the same moral potential as men, they can achieve sagehood if they cultivate their moral potential with the appropriate Confucian texts.

### *Women's achievement—sagehood*

The most important achievement in the Confucian tradition one could achieve is sagehood. The commonly known sages are the ancient sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu. Histories and ancient texts from Confucian and other philosophical schools frequently refer to them as virtuous individuals and exemplars for generations to follow. Confucius himself is referred to as a sage due to his exemplary virtues and teaching. Mencius, for the same reason, is commonly referred to as the Second Sage of the Confucian school. In the Confucian-Mencian school, few scholars claim to have attained the status of sage despite being well-respected. However, Confucianism holds that sagehood is attainable and it has always served as an inspiration and ideal for Confucian students. As mentioned, Mencius audaciously claims that everyone can become a sage—no matter their social class or birth. We, the commoners, are not substantively different from the sages in terms of our natural capacities and tendencies, the difference lies in our environment and moral cultivation (6A7).

A number of historical thinkers inspired by the Confucian-Mencian tradition, especially educated women of the Confucian school, explore the philosophical question: can women become moral sages? Even though Mencius' claims regarding sagehood seem to suggest that it is possible, he never specifically says so. Empress Renxiaowen (1361–1407) of the Ming Dynasty is the first to openly state that women can become sages. Empress Renxiaowen (maiden name Xu) is the wife of Emperor Chengzu (1360–1424); upon her death, he bestowed on her the honorary title of Renxiaowen in praise of her “humaneness” (*ren*), “filialness” (*xiao*), and her literary achievements (*wen*). She is the author of *Teachings for the Inner Court (Neixun)*, one of the four books later collectively referred to as the *Confucian Four Books for Women*. As Pang-White (2018) points out, “Empress Renxiaowen opens the door for women's sagehood. She firmly states that a woman can become a sage if her deeds equal those of exemplary sage queens” (125). The empress proclaims that “regardless of their gender or sex, all human beings are endowed with virtuous nature” (chapter 1), and further praises “her mother-in-law Empress Xiaocigao's teaching ‘sagely teachings’” (Pang-White 2018, 125). Pang-White further comments, “no previous writers, male or female, ever made this claim as clearly as she does, a remarkable step that has inspired a multitude of later women writers” (Pang-White 2018, 125). Given the empress's social position as the wife of the emperor, her claim—i.e., that the empress and emperor are on equal footing when it comes to pursuing moral sagehood—is especially relevant as she and her husband are the moral examples for all wives and husbands.

In addition, Madam Liu, the author of *The Short Records of Models for Women (Nü Fan Jie Lu)*—the last of the *Confucian Four Books for Women*—cites over 150 examples

of real women from history. Madam Liu is the most progressive in all the authors of the *Confucian Four Books for Women* as she adamantly claims woman's status as sages. In this book, she calls exemplary women "woman sages" and praises women whose talents surpass their husbands'. The work of female Korean thinker, Queen Sohae (1437–1504), is relevant here as well. Hye-Kyung Kim (2016) presents a historical argument that Queen Sohae, inspired by Mencius, composed the *Naehoon (Lessons for the Inner Quarter)*, a text for the instruction of women. Queen Sohae argues that women not only can become sages but should strive to become sages (Kim 2016, 90–91). Further, Sungmoon Kim (2014) examines the philosophical thought of the iconic Korean female neo-Confucian thinker, Im Yunjidang (1721–93) and her feminist appropriation of Neo-Confucian philosophy. Yunjidang argues that men and women have equal moral potential and are, therefore, equal in their pursuit of the ideal of moral sagehood.

After examining these arguments of historical female thinkers about women's sagehood, we can conclude that, in their estimation, the idea of a female sage is attainable in the Confucian-Mencian tradition in theory. In other words, women's moral achievement is possible provided they follow the Confucian teachings and cultivate their virtues.

These thinkers also reflect on the obstacles many women face in their moral development; one frequently mentioned practical obstacle is women's lack of education. How can women become moral sages if they cannot learn and recite the Confucian classics—such as *Lunyu*, *Mencius*, *Daxue*, *Zhongyong*, which are only available in schools reserved exclusively for men? If women receive no formal Confucian education, they surely will not have the opportunity to cultivate their virtues and achieve the ideal of sagehood—their moral potential will be left uncultivated and will be wasted.

### *The lack of education and the lack of access to Confucian texts*

Due to the absence of educational resources for women, a number of female thinkers authored their own books that focus on feminine virtues. Empress Renxiaowen points out that "women's education should not be delayed ... None [of the exemplary women] could have been so accomplished without being taught first" (Pang-White 2018, 125). This is one of the reasons she composed the *Teachings for the Inner Court*, a text which includes the stories of exemplary women who serve as models for other women to follow.

Madam Liu identified further ways the lack of education affects women through the *nei-wai* distinction, or the inner-outer distinction (*nei-wai zhi bie*).<sup>6</sup> She claims that girls are placed at a disadvantage when it comes to moral education because they are confined to the *nei* (household) domain and are not able to go to school with boys who study the Confucian classics from a young age. However, she argues that "children grow up to be men and women, and husbands and wives; consequently, education for both boys and girls is essential for a rightly ordered family life" (Pang-White 2018, 212). Women's lack of opportunity for moral development thus has repercussions not only for women but for all of society. Madam Liu encouraged women to cultivate their virtues despite these constraints and thus composed the *Short Records of Models for Women* so that women in the inner domain could learn from these exemplary women.<sup>7</sup>

The efforts made by these female thinkers are very promising; they give us hope that women not only have the potential and capacity to become moral sages, to cultivate and develop themselves, they also have the necessary "roadmap." On the other hand, some

recognize that, despite sagehood being theoretically achievable, there are other realistic barriers women face besides their lack of education—such as the division of labor and the social/familial roles assigned to women. A roadmap of the inner court is simply not enough.

### *The nei and wai distinction and fundamental constraints to women's development*

The division of *nei* and *wai*, or the inner and outer realm, is a structure that is neglected by many scholars whose research focuses on gender or sex. *Nei* and *wai* do not always strictly correlate with gender, nor should they simply be understood as synonymous with the domestic and the public domain. They are a pair of spatial binary terms that have their own unique characteristics in Chinese texts. *Nei* literally means “in” or “inner”; *wai* means “out” or “outer.” In early Confucian texts, the *nei-wai* distinction has many different meanings; it could mean, as in *Mencius*, the inner virtues and their outer exhibition; or, as in *Xunzi* and *Guanzi*, this distinction may signify the boundary between a civilized area and a barbaric, chaotic one, which does not maintain proper social distinctions, such as the one between men and women. However, no matter the particular meaning, this distinction of *nei-wai* is never static; it is always a functional definition with a somewhat flexible boundary. As Dorothy Ko puts it, the *nei-wai* distinction is “a relational category that describes a series of nested hierarchies whose boundary changes with context” (Ko 1994, 144–45).

Interestingly, even though the *nei* and *wai* distinction is recognized as posing a threat to women's access to education, its abolishment is obviously far too ahead of these thinkers' time. However, in their texts, these women seem to suggest that women have the capacity to step up into the *wai* domain to help their fathers, husbands, or sons.

For example, Empress Renxiaowen proclaims that women have great talent not only as care takers, but also as helpmates in the realm of politics and other matters belonging to the *wai* domain.<sup>8</sup> Madam Liu made the possibility of women's “trespassing” into the *wai* domain most clear in the “Wisdom” chapter of her book. Pang-White observes “[Madam Liu argues] women's wisdom is beneficial not only in household management but also in state affairs; note how the message crosses the inner-outer boundary between the private and the public” (Pang-White 2018, 214).

Although the great way of governing in peace rests on men, yet a wise woman surpasses a man. Grand long-term planning can be premeditated and predicted. Changes due to sudden emergencies, nonetheless, are vastly varied and infinite... [Zhao Kuo] studied his father's books [of military strategy] only superficially; his mother knew that he should not be deployed as a general ... Yue Yangzi could listen to his wife's admonition; he thus became accomplished. Ning Chenhao brought his state to destruction because he did not listen to a woman's warning ... These were all examples of women's great strategies and plans in governance and their keen understanding ... These women were the protectors of their countries and families and the helpmates of their husbands! (Pang-White 2018, 275–77)

The message is clear from the “Wisdom” chapter that the exemplary women's roles are not strictly limited to the inner domain but also go beyond it so that they are “protectors of their countries and families and the helpmates of their husbands”



(Pang-White 2018, 277). However, as the readers may quickly point out, these women are still constrained to the inner court—their overstepping into the outer domain is temporary and only praised when they were able to help their husbands. Education for women, as these female thinkers point out, can go a long way towards furthering women's opportunities for moral development; however, it may not be the sole factor that limits and hinders their progress and achievements.

At the beginning of the paper, I stated that I would discuss some practical concerns women in contemporary China face and analyze them from a perspective that is informed by Confucian philosophy. After all, looking at the subject of female moral sagehood from a contemporary perspective appears to lead in the same direction as the above-mentioned earlier female Confucian thinkers. Upon closer examination, a different picture emerges. Though they share many of the same challenges, women in East Asia today live under very different conditions: modern education is available to most women and Confucianism no longer occupies a dominant social position. Therefore, if Confucian philosophy is to make a contribution to feminist theory, a critical examination of both Confucianism and the women's condition in today's world is much needed.

In the following section, I will discuss briefly the cases of “leftover women” and the stigmatization of “female PhDs” in China to demonstrate that education is merely a symptom of a more fundamental issue within Confucian tradition—namely, the *nei/wai* distinction and the traditional family structure. When women's gender roles in the *nei* realm collide with their social recognition in the *wai* realm, Confucianism does not have the answers to guide and help them. I further argue that a systematic examination of these fundamental ideas in the Confucian tradition needs to be conducted so that this philosophical tradition can continue to provide moral guidance for women in the future.

## When education isn't the answer

### *Learning becomes a curse*

In the last section, we discussed how female Confucian thinkers composed *The Confucian Four Books for Women* to address the gap caused by women's lack of education. These texts demonstrate that earlier Confucian women believed that women have the moral potential, in theory, to aspire to moral excellence with the proper education. However, during the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), education or literacy was sometimes viewed as a burden, even a curse, to learned women. Learning not only didn't help them to become female sages, it left them in an unfavorable position. As Rosenlee notes,

The tragic nature of women's advanced literacy is a shared sentiment among learned women whose surplus literary talent is an obstacle rather than a means to contentment in life. Liang Lanyi—a Qing poet—in her poem “Teaching My Draught” (*kenu* 課女) wrote: “How unhappy and unfortunate a life has your mother been leading? / I have been suffering from knowing and learning too much./ Four virtues and three followings are forever the most important guidance for women.<sup>9</sup> / That's why I have been teaching you these sorts of conduct industriously./ You should learn to be gentle and tender, act in a womanly way./ All other insignificant skills should be given up.” Learned and accomplished women poets such as Liang Lanyi ... were torn between the fame of poetry writing

and their gender sphere of *nei*, where advanced literacy served no practical purpose at all. (Rosenlee 2006, 113)

The reason the nature of learned women is tragic is that their literary achievement, a skill traditionally viewed as belonging to the *wen* domain—thus the *wai* realm—has no practical use, nor legitimacy, because women are constrained to the *nei* realm. No matter how accomplished a woman is in scholarship or literacy, she cannot enter the elective *keju* examination and become a government officer; she cannot make a difference or leave a mark in the *wai* realm. Rosenlee further notes that, in the Confucian societies, “learning and writing, according to the orthodox view, must have a public and ethical function. Unlike their male counterparts, talented and learned women have no legitimate access to the *wai* realm where their talents can be utilized by the state and hence their advanced literacy can be justified” (Rosenlee 2006, 112–13). For these reasons, women’s literary skills serve no practical use and have little ethical value in the Confucian tradition. Even when women surpass their brothers or husbands in learning, in Rosenlee (2006)’s words, “without a legitimate outlet to utilize their talents, [they] bring sorrow rather than honor to the family” (113).

This example from imperial China is still relevant in the modern age. Despite the fact that primary and higher education has been made widely accessible to modern Chinese women, they nevertheless still find their learning brings sorrow instead of honor to their families—like their Qing Dynasty counterparts.

### *The third sex and the “leftover women”*

Although contemporary women in Confucian societies are no longer strictly limited to the *nei* domain, they are still expected to shoulder a greater share of domestic responsibilities than men. Moreover, though they have access to higher education and the classic Confucian texts, women may still find their traditional social roles quite limiting, and the ethical criteria of the *nei* and *wai* realms unclear or difficult to comprehend and navigate.

China has the highest percentages of educated and employed women of any country; however, women’s achievement is not always welcomed. For example, in the early twenty-first century, the Chinese government launched an infamous campaign to address the problem of “leftover” women—i.e., women who were unmarried by the age of 27. At the same time, the stigmatization of “female PhD” (*nü boshi*) started to emerge as a new social phenomenon; popular new media and online media openly declared that female doctorate degree holders are undesirable to men and therefore should be considered “the third sex.” It was believed that they lost their feminine qualities by pursuing a doctorate degree.

These campaigns to shame “leftover” women and female PhDs have been well-received by the public; the idea quickly caught on that by pursuing a PhD, women had made themselves undesirable due to their intellectual achievement. Many women gave up their chances of pursuing their intellectual growth under familial and societal pressure—many also hide their doctorates or master degrees, and other achievements, in the match-making process. I will not go into too much detail discussing this phenomenon, but I do want to highlight an excerpt from the *New York Times* describing how the term “leftover women” was coined by the state agency:

In 2007, the Women's Federation<sup>10</sup> defined “leftover” women (*sheng nü*) as unmarried women over the age of 27 and China's Ministry of Education added the term to its official lexicon. Since then, the Women's Federation Web site has run articles stigmatizing educated women who are still single.

Take this uplifting column from March 2011 that ran just after International Women's Day:

“Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls.”

After knocking some good sense into those misguided women who pursue a higher education, the column accuses educated, single women of sleeping around and having degenerate morals:

“Many highly educated ‘leftover women’ are very progressive in their thinking and enjoy going to nightclubs to search for a one-night stand, or they become the mistress of a high official or rich man. It is only when they have lost their youth and are kicked out by the man, that they decide to look for a life partner. Therefore, most ‘leftover women’ do not deserve our sympathy.” (Hong Fincher 2012)

Evidently, the government decided that shaming women into lowering their standards and entering marriage—out of fear that they would otherwise “lose value”—was a more effective strategy than pressuring men to make themselves more desirable to potential female partners. Thus, women today are being forced to accept the familial role of wife and, more importantly, mother of future citizens. There are many possible reasons why the Chinese government, a socialist government founded upon the value of equality between two sexes, would launch a campaign like this—indeed, scholars highlight two main reasons: China's low birthrate, which has dropped from 2.63 per women in 1980 to 1.50 per women in 2000, and the disproportionate sex-ratio between men and women, which resulted from factors such as sex-selective abortion and female infanticide (Wu 2018). I do not wish to go into further detail on the social background of this phenomenon—many excellent studies have been conducted on the issue of “leftover women.”<sup>11</sup> What I want to discuss here is the theoretical and philosophical background that has resulted in the stigmatization of highly educated and/or unmarried women over the age of 27, and the reason why shaming campaigns have received widespread, enthusiastic support from the public. I will also argue that, in its current state, Confucianism is neither helpful nor sympathetic to the plight of women in modern China.

The stigmatization of the female PhD illustrates the conflicting values that inform women's subordinate role in the family and their achievements in the outer domain. China has a long history of valuing education and learning. The most advanced scholars and teachers in the Confucian tradition are referred to by the term *Bo Shi*, which is used to translate “doctorate degree.” This term symbolizes the utmost achievement in the outer domain of *wen* (literacy) and *zheng* (politics/governance). Confucius himself is viewed, first and foremost, as a teacher in addition to being recognized as a great thinker

and philosopher; he is frequently addressed as the “exemplary teacher for thousands of generations.” Given the long tradition of having the nation-wide selective exam (*keju*) serve as the path to the elite, ruling class, a student’s achievement in education and scholarly work has always been viewed with the utmost respect.

One way of interpreting the ostracization of female PhDs is to see these women as having transgressed into the traditionally male dominated *wai* sphere of *wen* and *zheng*. These women can no longer fit neatly into traditional family roles, which dictate that the position of wife is inferior to that of the husband; moreover, it is popularly believed that they will not find a husband as no man can tolerate having a PhD for a wife. Note that this is very different from the cases illustrated in the “Wisdom” chapter of Madam Liu’s book that argue women’s talents and wisdom sometimes surpass that of their husbands and thus they can be of benefit to the state. In one story, Madam Liu mentions that Lady Jing, the wife of the prominent philosopher and politician Guan Zhong, was able to decipher a hidden message in a poem that was given to Guan Zhong by a potential political helper, which Guan Zhong himself could not understand.<sup>12</sup> Lady Jing gave some clever remarks on this matter and helped him recruit this political helper. Note the difference here: in this example, Lady Jing steps into the *wai* domain temporarily to apply her wisdom and by assisting her husband she was able to contribute to the affairs of the state. In the case of contemporary female PhDs, society recognizes that these women cannot assume a secondary position to a man after having been honored with highest achievement possible in the intellectual, public domain. The social value of a doctorate degree poses an obstacle to the traditional husband-wife relationship. The value accorded to education and the value accorded to women as wives and mothers are not commensurate. Moreover, as these women are already well established in the *wai* sphere—having achieved recognition in *wen/zheng* or financial success—it becomes difficult to ask them to step back into the *nei* sphere and assume a supportive role. This makes it difficult to place them within the traditional *nei* and *wai* distinction—therefore the term “the third sex” for women with doctorate degrees is actually very telling. In China, women’s achievement and development is well received by the public so long as it does not pose a threat to the traditional family structure—so long as their achievements do not surpass their husbands’ (surpassing other men is not a problem). The shaming of female PhDs is a natural consequence of this line of reasoning.

Now, let us turn to the subject of “leftover women.” Although this term was initially coined as a negative phrase to induce shame and social pressure, ten years after it was introduced, the meaning of this term has changed. The shaming of female PhDs has subsided, and the term “leftover woman” has been reclaimed and redefined with positive meaning—more and more people from the younger generation choose not to get married out of fear that women’s rights are not being protected in marriage—they fear being pressured into accepting a subordinate role, which will force them to abandon professional goals for familial virtues. They also fear that they will be forced to make unappreciated sacrifices and take on unrecognized housework. Many women nowadays refuse to marry and thus they are “leftover” by choice. By not marrying, they remain the head of their families as independent women.

Thus, if we look at the term “leftover women” again, we see that they have not only been left behind by potential husbands; they have been excluded from participating in the traditional family model and from engaging in the relationships that the Confucian tradition deeply values. Such women are outliers in Chinese history; in the past, widows and single women, though they had to endure many hardships in life, made great

achievements in the *wai* domain—as the lives of Madam Liu, Ban Zhao, and Im Yunjidang illustrate. Losing their husbands or sons, while tragic, liberated them from their subordinate family role; because Confucian tradition tolerates such “oversteps” when the male counterpart is not present, their achievements in the *wai* domain have been well recognized and even praised. Having reclaimed the term and embraced their potential for achievement in the outer domain, the “leftover women” of today may find themselves in a similar situation to these exemplary female outliers.

Although in contemporary China the *wai* realm appears to be open to women, many find that their lives in this domain are not so easy. Sometimes, their participation in the *wai* domain is coerced or seen as an obligation. In the 1970s and 1980s, another stigmatizing campaign, directed at “household women (*funü*)”, was launched through propaganda to shame women who did not hold full-time jobs for their “laziness” and lack of contribution to the “socialist construction” of the country (Zhong et al. 2001, 27–37). Young girls identified themselves with the genderless notion of *qingnian* (young person) but not *funü* (women) because the term *funü* carried the implication of “staying at home and not contributing (as workers) to the society.” *Funü* are traditional and simply not progressive enough, so they were told to believe. This movement contributed to the radical change of women’s condition in China—China now has a high rate of working women and women with higher education. However, this so-called “liberation of women” movement only reinforced women’s *obligation* to enter the workplace, it did not free them from their *nei* responsibilities—employed women still managed the household and housework, as well as raised the children and took care of their aging parents and in-laws out of respect for the traditional virtue of filial piety. These women earned the title of “workers or contributors of the socialist regime” at the expense of being “double-taxed” by being made to work both a full-time job, while taking care of a large part of matters in the *nei* realm. From a theoretical perspective, we could say that the women who were subject to the “household women” and “leftover women” campaigns were evaluated according to the conflicting criteria of both the inner and outer domains, and then shamed for failing to live up to the standard of either.

In the case of the “leftover women” campaign, these women are much more fortunate than their pre-modern counterparts, who lived in an era when women’s education and literary achievements brought sorrow and regret. Women in modern China, though they may fail in their roles as wives and mothers, can still be relatively successful in business, academics, or politics. For the women of modern China, these accomplishments can bring them high social status; however, they will not necessarily pave their way to moral excellence or sagehood, as women’s sagehood has never been clearly defined or described outside of the *nei* domain. It must be noted that Confucianism as a school of philosophical thought that focuses on moral cultivation does not effectively guide these women—whatever roadmap it provides is confusing and contains many different, even conflicting, values. The path to sagehood in the *wai* domain is designated for men, and in the *nei* domain it is strictly reserved for women who possess outdated feminine virtues, but a roadmap for either gender through both domains is unclear at best, and full of moral dilemmas, or even traps, at worst.

The conclusion I wish to draw here is that a systematic critique of the Confucian familial relationship needs to be conducted. The division of *nei* and *wai* needs to be critically reformed. We must have a better and reformed understanding of the inner and outer distinction that addresses not only women but also men’s role in a society. For example, in an online debate about how, during the Spring Festival, women were

not seen eating alongside men at the main table but were eating at side tables together, the author of an opinion article states that such an occurrence is not a form of discrimination against women; he maintains that women must go in and out of kitchen to prepare the food all the time, and this is compatible with the innocent tradition of “Man manages the *wai* domain Women the *nei*” (Yuan, 2019). What shocks me most about this comment is the author’s lack of understanding of how the *nei* and *wai* domain is the structure that suppressed women throughout Chinese history, as it is the structure that stops women from celebrating the most important festival of the year in the living room and participating in the rituals related to the festival. Instead of understanding sexism through a Chinese or Confucian lens, the author misapplied the Western idea of discrimination as the exclusion of someone based on sex/gender and thus was able to turn a blind eye to the suppression of women in plain sight. This example illustrates that, without a careful examination of the relationships and the *nei/wai* distinction, Confucian philosophy cannot serve as a very useful resource to women nowadays.

### *Theoretical weapon for women*

When we critically examine the *nei-wai* distinction, it is important to accord as much attention to the *nei* domain as the *wai* domain so that one’s achievement and role in the inner domain can also be recognized. It is significant to note that there appear to be no texts that address men’s domestic role, though there are passages that compare the reliance a wife has on a husband to that of a man has on his rulers or superiors. In order to achieve a more fluid relationship between the *nei* and *wai*, and provide women with a theoretical and practical path to moral cultivation, we need more philosophical discussion of this division itself and its correlation with men and women.

I also want to point out that there are rich theoretical resources that women can use to defend their learning and achievement. For example, facing the stigmatization of “leftover women” and the female PhD shaming, the Mencian idea of shame can be a useful weapon. According to both Confucius and Mencius, whether you are of low birth or are poor, what others think of you should not be a reason to cause you to feel shame. In other words, one should not feel shame for others’ disapproval (Hu 2022). Yan Hui is virtuous despite living in an alley, and those who enjoy high stipend in a chaotic time (implying that they acquired their wealth in unjust ways) should feel shame (*The Analects*, 14.1; Ames and Rosemont 1999, 171).

To Mencius, one should feel shame for behaving in ways that fall below one’s own ethical standard. This view has been articulated by a number of commentators such as Kwong-loi Shun (Shun, 1997, 2013), Bryan Van Norden (2002), and Bongrae Seok (2017). Justin Tiwald (2017) describes Confucian shame as “autonomous shame” and states that “a person’s sense of shame is autonomous if and only if it is elicited by one’s own views about what’s shameful. This is to be contrasted with a sense of shame that tracks other peoples’ views—especially popular views—of what’s shameful and is elicited by the belief that others regard something about oneself as shameful” (Tiwald 2017, 48). In other words, one should care for her own ethical growth and integrity more than others’ beliefs about her. The Confucian concept of shame can be used as a theoretical weapon against the public shaming and stigmatization against women, or against anyone. These forms of shaming directly contradict the Mencian conception of how shame is supposed to function—the purpose of Confucian shame is to propel the individual to maintain their ethical integrity and pursue moral development, goals which necessitate intellectual growth. Confucian women can thus use their

own sense of shame to safeguard their values, instead of falling victims of the public shaming against learned women.

### Moving forward: moral evaluation of the *nei* domain

In this paper, with the help of a number of historical Confucian female thinkers' arguments on female sagehood and the moral potential of women, I first showed that there are theoretical space and resources to support women's moral development and moral achievement in the Confucian philosophical tradition. The lack of education, according to thinkers, such as Empress Renxiaowen and Madam Liu, is the key issue that hinders women's moral development and prevents them from becoming moral sages. Against this claim, I argue that education and learning is not the main obstacle facing women—many pre-modern, learned women found their academic talent and literacy a curse rather than a recognized achievement. The reason for this is the division of *nei* and *wai*, which continues to pose moral dilemmas and create situations of conflicting values for women today. By discussing the shaming of “leftover women” and the stigmatization of female PhDs, I illustrate that the *nei/wai* structure, which persists in the Asian culture and the Confucian tradition, places women in morally indefensible positions. Women nowadays are evaluated by two sets of moral values—the feminine virtues of the *nei* domain and the virtues on the *wai* domain. Failing either evaluation results in moral failure. As many of the values of these domains are in tension, if not in outright conflict, with each other, many women find themselves in an impossible position. In order for Confucianism to be made relevant and helpful to women today, we cannot simply point to the tradition's theoretical position on the possibility of female moral sagehood or look to the examples of exemplary women contained in the texts. The studying of Confucianism should help us reimagine, reform, and reinvent Confucianism so that it can guide women in their journey of learning and self-fulfillment. A critical examination of the *nei-wai* distinction in today's world is direly needed.

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### Notes

1 Chenyang Li, argues that the Confucian idea of Jen (or Ren) is compatible with and can help further care ethics (Li 1994). For a number of notable articles in this debate over whether Confucianism can be of help to care ethics, see Yuan (2002), Star (2002), and Li (2016).

2 For a recent notable translation, see Pang-White 2018.

3 Rosenlee further clarifies what she means by “the structure and institution,” which she holds responsible for the oppression of women: “The root of women's oppression in China runs deeper than Confucianism as a state ideology. Confucianism is more than a state ideology for the learned social and political elites; its connections, if there is any, with gender oppression in everyday life must be found instead in the institution of the family where the Confucian emphasis on the familial virtue of filial piety, the continuity of the family nature, and ancestor worship are more of a way of life” (Rosenlee 2006, 121–22).

4 For a detailed discussion of the affective components of the four hearts and how moral motivations are cultivated, see Hu (2019a, 2019b).

5 For example, in a story Mencius wants to divorce his wife for not behaving according to rituals—she sat in an inappropriate manner in her husband's presence. After hearing this reason, Mencius' mother

informed Mencius that it was he who entered the house unannounced first. Thus, the wife's inappropriate appearance was a result of him not obeying the rituals in the first place. Mencius, in the story, was persuaded by his mother; he felt shame for his request and trespass, and no longer wanted to divorce his wife.

**6** I will discuss the *nei-wai* distinction in more detail in the next section.

**7** As Pang-White (2018, 212) summarizes, “She (Madam Liu) wrote the work to encourage women not to despair but, rather, to draw inspiring lessons from historically exemplary women: for [a] person who uses a bronze as mirror can straighten clothes and cap; a woman who uses history as her teacher can surely find worthy role models. If she can take the ancients as her teachers, there is no reason she should be worried that her virtue is not cultivated (chapter 1). In doing so, women could also become like the sage kings of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜.”

**8** For example, as Pang-White observes from Empress Renxiaowen's writing, “the significance of women's work as inner helpmate—not only to the well-being of a family but also to the flourishing of a society and the stability of a nation—is well articulated in this book” (Pang-White 2018, 126). Indeed, Empress Renxiaowen claims, “a wife, in serving her husband, should not stop at only taking care of his food and clothes. There must be something else that a wife can assist with. One may follow or disobey a friend's advice. Nonetheless, words between a husband and a wife are congenial and easier to keep in mind. Day and night, I serve the Emperor and only thinking about the people. I urge you too to endeavor to do this” (Pang-White 2018, 122).

**9** “The Four virtues and three followings” refer to the feminine virtues and moral code. More specifically, the four virtues refer to feminine conduct, feminine speech, feminine comportment, and feminine works. The three followings refer to following her father (before getting married), following her husband (after getting married), and following her sons (after the husband's death).

**10** The official name of Women's Federation is “All-China Women's Federation.” It is officially a “women's rights people's organization established in China in 1949,” but in reality, it is directly under the government's control and frequently seen as a division that manages affairs related to women.

**11** For example, Hong Fincher (2014) is an excellent resource that examines various aspects of the leftover social phenomenon, including the wealth gap between men and women.

**12** This story is also documented in *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, a collection of 125 biographical stories edited by Liu Xiang (~ 18 BCE). For a translation, see Kinney (2014).

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