

# Feminist Encounters with Confucius

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# Beyond Sexism: The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Confucianism

*George Wrisley and Samantha Wrisley*

## 1 Introduction

Confucianism has been associated with sexist practices such as footbinding, child-brides, and female infanticide, among others.<sup>1</sup> Because of such associations, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, for example, is concerned to address the extent to which those forms of sexism are intrinsic to Confucianism and not “merely” a product of its historical background. She rightly asks, “. . . how does one identify the ‘sexist’ components in Confucianism as a whole? . . . is there an inevitable causal link between ‘Confucianism’ and ‘sexism’? In short, is ‘Confucianism’ sexist through and through?”<sup>2</sup> It is our impression that the sexism/oppression that is at issue in such discussions of Confucianism is sexism/oppression against women *qua* women. The purpose of this paper is to show that, in light of intersectional approaches to oppression, looking at Confucianism from the singular angle of *sexism*, so understood, is insufficient if our concern is to address to what extent Confucianism entails (women’s) oppression.

## 2 Preliminaries

Our goal is to take part in advocating for the (continued) value of Confucius’ philosophy. We agree with Roger Ames when he writes, “. . . Confucianism offers us philosophical assets that can be resourced and applied to serve not only the

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1 Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 15.

2 Rosenlee *Confucianism and Women*, 15. Similarly, Chenyang Li addresses the issue of Confucianism and feminist concerns by addressing three questions, namely: Has Confucianism oppressed women? If yes, then how much? And what can be done about it? See Chenyang Li, “Confucianism and Feminist Concerns: Overcoming the Confucian ‘Gender Complex,’” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2000), 187.

renaissance of a revitalized Chinese culture, but also the interests of the world culture more broadly.”<sup>3</sup> The body of recent work that takes feminist concerns seriously in the Confucian context<sup>4</sup> has been vital for Confucian philosophy’s continued relevance and appeal.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a kind of course correction needs to be made, one that recognizes more fully the complex, intersectional nature of oppression and the ways that it can manifest in a Confucian context.<sup>6</sup> The key aspect of the intersectional approach that we are recommending is its claim that the idea of a “pure” form of oppression such as sexism, i.e., an isolatable and discrete form of oppression along gender lines, is problematic. Just as in Confucianism a person is neither a preformed, discrete human “substance,” nor simply a parent, child, sibling, friend, or subject, but rather a process that is the intersection of her relationships, the nature of a person’s lived experience of oppression is what it is only at the intersecting lines of various modes of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, ageism, etc.

One of our concerns is that attempts to defend Confucianism against charges of sexism in the recent literature have focused on showing that much that is at the heart of Confucianism is also at the heart of feminism. And thus we find a general type of response, namely: Confucianism actually advocates  $x$  and  $x$  is also what feminism advocates; therefore, Confucianism is not actually

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3 Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 2.

4 We use “Confucian context” to refer to that state of affairs that is a group of people who are followers of Confucius such that the society can be characterized as *Confucian* and the people can be said to be generally committed to the goals of Confucius’ philosophy. This, of course, leaves open whether it is a context in which people are “good Confucians,” i.e., skillful in achieving, for example, consummate conduct (*ren* 仁). This latter point will be important later on.

5 For example, see Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*; A.T. Nuyen, “Love and Respect in the Confucian Family,” in *The Moral Circle and the Self*, ed. Kim-chong Chong, Sor-hoon Tan, and C.L. Ten (Chicago: Open Court, 2003); Chenyang Li, *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000); Susan Mann and Yu-ying Cheng, ed., *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

6 Rosenlee goes somewhat in this direction, discussing the problems with essentializing the category of “woman,” as if there were one thing that is to be a woman across time and culture. And she acknowledges that in Western feminism there is a good deal of attention paid to race and class. See Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 152. However, her concern in these areas has to do with what she sees as the inadequate attention paid to the details of Chinese/Confucian culture in cross-cultural gender comparisons. She does not bring in or mention the methodology of an intersectional approach.

sexist *at its core*.<sup>7</sup> It may well be true that Confucianism shares certain core values with feminism,<sup>8</sup> but, as we will argue, the basic goal of ending oppression will be unachievable if we fail to recognize the number of ways that oppression can manifest intersectionally in, and because of, the Confucian context. One of those ways, as we will discuss in detail, is due to the centrality of both the kinds of relationships at the heart of Confucianism and their hierarchical nature, and the fact that it is unlikely that everyone in a Confucian context will be a good Confucian. Therefore, if our interest is to in some way rehabilitate Confucianism to avoid oppression, we cannot simply expunge the obviously sexist elements from, for example, ritual propriety (*li* 禮), while playing up the elements that are in common with feminist concerns, for example, the virtue of consummate conduct (*ren* 仁).

### 3 The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Oppression in the Confucian Context

When considering the relationships between sexism, Confucianism, and the idea of a female ethic, Hall and Ames acknowledge the importance of two points made by Jean Grimshaw, who is skeptical of a sex- or gender-based ethic. The first is that regardless of the cultural or biological origin of male and female “voices,” we find that we cannot describe them in any neat and clear way; and this is because neither all males nor all females have an essence that marks them or their voices as male or female.<sup>9</sup> This observation about the problematic nature of articulating a male and female voice due to the variety of possible male and female voices leads us nicely into intersectionality. One reason that there is no such thing as *the* female voice is that a woman’s experience is never simply that of a woman, but that of a Black woman, a poor woman, a lesbian, a transgender woman, a poor Latina lesbian, etc.<sup>10</sup> Oppression is lived at the intersections of its multiple modes; oppressed voices speak from these

7 This is one way to view the strategy, or part of the strategy, of writers such as Rosenlee, Nuyen, Li, and Xinyan Jiang. For the latter, see Xinyan Jiang, “Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2009): 228–42.

8 And we should acknowledge, too, though that there is not a single movement which is feminism, but a diverse range of movements, authors, and goals that fall under “Feminism.”

9 Hall, David L. and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 86.

10 Similarly, we should keep in mind the differences between, for example, a Black woman living in rural Louisiana and a Black woman living in Chicago, and an American Black woman and a Nigerian Black woman, etc.

intersections. It is here that a central value of the intersectional approach that we are recommending can be seen: it can reveal what would otherwise be hidden and/or subtle forms of oppression not easily discerned either at all or in their proper light in its absence.<sup>11</sup>

“Intersectionality” can refer to either intersectional theory or intersectional oppression manifesting in life; importantly much work that happens on intersectionality does not go by that name.<sup>12</sup> As a feminist theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw put a name to intersectionality in 1989, though it had been floating in the feminist consciousness for much longer.<sup>13</sup> It seeks to understand how a variety of biological and socially constructed categories (age, race, sex, gender, class, ability, etc.) come together, or intersect, to create unique circumstances by which individuals are oppressed—unique circumstances in which “. . . hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources—economic, political, and cultural” manifest.<sup>14</sup> Within the feminist context, the need for an intersectional approach to oppression stemmed from the fact that white feminism did not accurately represent the struggles faced by women of color. There was the recognition that feminism—as a movement for and by women—should not limit the scope of its activism and theory to liberating white, middle-class women. It became clearer and clearer that in order to capture an accurate

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- 11 And thus since we are not focusing on Confucianism merely as an historical “object,” but as a viable contemporary standpoint, our project is a contribution to Rosenlee’s goal of providing “. . . a point from which to begin to conceive Confucianism as a viable resource to deploy in a move toward liberation for Chinese women by indicating what might be the steps necessary to construct Confucian feminism,” since one of the goals of a Confucian feminism is a Confucianism that does not embody or produce oppression.” (Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 4).
- 12 Patrick R. Grzanka, Introduction to *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader*, edited by Patrick R. Grzanka (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), xviii.
- 13 While there is debate about its exact nature and usefulness, the importance of considering an intersectional approach is generally taken to be a given by feminist scholars: “. . . it is not an exaggeration to suggest that wherever one looks in women’s and gender studies and across much of the academy, intersectionality is being theorized, applied, or debated. . . .” See Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz, *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class, & Gender* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1. We will lay out some of its key tenets in a general way, one that will allow us to show its value in the Confucian context; however, we will not be entering into the depths of detail that those interested in theorizing the nature of intersectionality would be concerned to enter into.
- 14 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” in *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class, & Gender*, edited by Michele Tracy and Kathleen Guidroz, 44–60 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 51.

understanding of people's oppressed experience, we cannot focus one at a time on their race or gender or class or sexual orientation, etc. We must view individuals as they are: completely social beings. An oppressed person is never simply her gender, or race, or class, or . . . She is these things intersecting to create a unique social identity or experience of oppression.

As Yuval-Davis notes, different modalities of oppression clearly interlock: "When people are excluded from specific jobs, like teaching or becoming a bishop, as recently happened in the Anglican church, because of their sexualities, this concerns not only their social and cultural recognition but also their economic position."<sup>15</sup> A useful example of intersectional oppression can be found in the case of "DeGraffenried v. General Motors," in which five Black women levied suit against GM, stating that they were unfairly fired due to their status as Black women. In their defense, GM produced evidence that showed that they indeed employed both women (white and who worked in the *offices*) and men (Black and who worked in the *plants*). Due to the fact that the court would not recognize the plaintiffs' "Black women" status as one that should be protected, apart from their separate identity as "women" and "Black," the case was dismissed. The Black women working for GM failed to find justice in the legal system because they inhabited an unacknowledged *intersection* of race and gender. In other words, the problem was not one of discrimination by addition—adding oppression from being Black to oppression from being a woman—the discrimination was of a unique, intersectional variety.

We thus see that simply knowing that a woman operates within a patriarchal society is not sufficient for describing her lived experience as an oppressed person. For one to fully understand the extent to which she is oppressed, one must also consider her race, age, sexual orientation, gender, class, ability and other social factors that are viewed by society in various degrees of acceptance and marginalization. Without this broadened insight informing our analysis, we will likely miss individualized instances of subjugation (as in the GM case). Another harmful outcome of ignoring intersectionality is that we may fail to provide an adequate and just rectification of oppression. Crenshaw provides us with an important example of this. United States Immigration law once required that a person—usually a woman—who has immigrated to the United States in order to marry a U.S. citizen must have remained "properly" married for two years before she could apply for permanent status. The lawmakers that wrote this particular provision failed to anticipate that the rigid time minimum enacted by this law discouraged many immigrant women from separating and divorcing abusive spouses. Crenshaw writes, "When faced

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15 Ibid., 52.



with the choice between protection from their batterers and protection from deportation, many immigrant women chose the latter.”<sup>16</sup> Faced with the grievous ramifications of this “double subordination,” Congress included in the 1990 Immigration Act a decree amending the marriage fraud regulations that allowed for women to obtain an “explicit waiver for hardship” caused by spousal abuse. Unfortunately, to obtain such a waiver, women had to provide evidence in the form of (but not limited to) police reports, medical records, and affidavits from social service agents. But as Crenshaw notes:

... cultural barriers often further discourage immigrant women from reporting or escaping battering situations. Tina Shum, a family counselor at a social service agency, points out that “[t]his law sounds so easy to apply, but there are cultural complications in the Asian community that make even these requirements difficult. . . . Just to find the opportunity and courage to call us is an accomplishment for many.”<sup>17</sup>

Requiring bureaucratic documentation of abuse, thus, put immigrant women, many of whom had limited financial and cultural resources at their disposal, in a difficult position and, thus, they were often further discouraged from escaping their violent marriages. While the legislation was meant to provide women with a safer path to citizenship rather than staying married to their abusive partner, requiring immigrant women to provide documentation that contained explicit evidence of their violent marriages created a new oppressive situation that was, by nature of the intended subject, inherently classed and raced.

Our analysis of possible oppression in the Confucian context relies on two key aspects of the intersectional approach. The first we have already illustrated, namely, the claim that there are unique forms of oppression that occur only at the intersections of modes of oppression—the GM case is a paradigmatic example. The second we have mentioned and that is that a person’s daily lived experience of oppression cannot be understood properly if the modalities of oppression are considered individually in isolation. This follows in part from the first aspect above, but can be further seen in Cressida Heyes’s description of the problematic nature of second wave feminism:

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16 Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1247.

17 *Ibid.*, 1248.

Friedan's famous proposition [in the *Feminine Mystique*] that women needed to get out of the household and into the professional workplace was, bell hooks pointed out, predicated on the experience of a post-war generation of white, middle-class married women confined to house-keeping and child-rearing by their professional husbands (Friedan 1963; hooks 1981). Many women of color and working-class women had worked outside their homes (sometimes in *other* women's homes) for decades; some lesbians had a history of working in traditionally male occupations or living alternative domestic lives without a man's "family wage." Similarly, some women from the less developed world have been critical of Northern feminist theory for globalizing its claims.<sup>18</sup>

A Mexican woman working in a white, middle-class person's home, who experiences racial discrimination from her employer—she overhears the employer refer to her as a "wetback," say—does not have an isolated, abstracted experience of racism. She experiences that racism as a lower class Mexican woman working in another person's home. Her experience of being called a "wetback" would (almost certainly) be different than that of a Mexican man who owns a business.<sup>19</sup> This aspect of intersectionality, namely, that each person's experience of oppression is unique, lines up well with the fact that in the Confucian context, a person is literally constituted by his unique set of relationships—he is their intersection—and his experience is that of a person at that unique intersection.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/identity-politics/>, 2012. We should note that Heyes's description may only be applicable to dominant trends within second wave feminism, and not second wave feminism as a whole. Thanks to Matt Drabek for this point.

19 The inseparability of the different modes of oppression is intended primarily at the level of lived experience, not from the standpoint of ontology. That is, it is not claimed that gender and its concomitant sexism are conceptually dependent upon other social divisions and their concomitant forms of oppression. One way in which they are ontologically distinct is that they are not reducible to each other, i.e., classism does not reduce to sexism. For more on this distinction between lived experience and ontology, see Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics."

20 We purposely use the masculine pronoun here because of what will come up later regarding the idea that in the Confucian context, women are ultimately denied full personhood.

#### 4 An Intersectional Approach to Confucianism

There are a number of possible ways in which intersectional oppression is a concern for Confucianism. We have already made the general point that oppression is not experienced along the lines of a single modality. Thus, if we are concerned with the relationship between Confucianism and sexism, we need to be aware of the ways in which sexism intersects with other modes of oppression, for example, racism. Beyond that general point, we now want to argue that there are two central ways in which intersectional oppression could manifest in a Confucian context.

First, it is possible to have unique forms of intersectional oppression that occur at the intersection of the hierarchical Confucian relationships (with what we would refer to as the not always equitable demands of ritual propriety [*li* 禮] that govern them) and our contemporary (western) society's institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, etc. The intersectional oppression would come from the hierarchical specifics of ritual propriety in combination with current cultural institutionalized oppression. That is, the specifics of ritual propriety may simply delineate lines of deference, i.e., lines of power inequality, and then, along those lines of power inequality, institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, etc., manifest. For our purposes, let us call this type *mixed intersectional oppression*.

Second, it is possible that the demands of ritual propriety that govern individual roles give rise to intersectional oppression because of their specific content and their normative claims regarding deference and power inequality.<sup>21</sup> An example would be where ritual propriety was such that sexism and ageism intersected, as it might for the youngest daughter in a family. For our purposes, let us call this type *intrinsic intersectional oppression*. Let us look at these two types of Confucian intersectional oppression in more detail.

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21 There are, of course, various forms of what could be called inequalities of power. We are concerned with those that are power over another person such that the one in power can exert some sort of force against the other. This could be in the form of physical or symbolic violence, for example. The former would be where one who is physically stronger than another exerted physical force against the weaker. The latter would be where, for example, an obstetrician told a birthing mother that she must have a C-section when the reason for it is so that he may be done in time to have drinks with friends.

## 5 Mixed Confucian Intersectional Oppression

What we are calling mixed intersectional oppression is that form of intersectional oppression that could occur at the intersection of Confucianism and non-Confucian forms of oppressions, such as racism, classism, and sexism. We learn very early in the *Analects* that the concepts of filial conduct/responsibility (*xiao* 孝), ritual propriety (*li* 禮),<sup>22</sup> and consummate conduct (*ren* 仁) are tightly entwined. Family/filial responsibility (*xiaodi* 孝弟) is the root of consummate conduct (*ren* 仁):

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao* 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility [*xiaodi* 孝弟], it is, I suspect the root of authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁)<sup>23</sup>

And serving one's parents by observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is a central way to manifest filial conduct/responsibility (*xiao* 孝):

Meng Yizi asked about filial conduct (*xiao* 孝). The Master replied: "Do not act contrary." Fan Chi was driving the Master's chariot, and the Master informed him further: "Meng Yizi asked me about filial conduct, and I replied: 'Do not act contrary.'" Fan Chi asked, "What did you mean by that?" The Master replied: "while they are living, serve them according to the observances of ritual propriety (*li* 禮); when they are dead, bury them and sacrifice to them according to the observances of ritual propriety"<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, being deferential and accommodating is central to ritual propriety:

Master You said: "... That being deferential gets one close to observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is because it keeps disgrace and insult at a distance. Those who are accommodating and do not lose those with whom they are close are deserving of esteem."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> We want to make explicit that in what follows we are not operating with a view of ritual propriety such that it is merely a matter of internalizing rules/rites. It is well taken that, among other things, it is also a matter of countenance and internalizing the appropriate shame response (*Analects* 2.3; 2.8).

<sup>23</sup> *Analects* 1.2.

<sup>24</sup> *Analects* 2.5.

<sup>25</sup> *Analects* 1.13.

And consider the deference called for in such passages from the *Book of Rites*:

The bridegroom himself stands by (the carriage of the bride), and hands to her the strap (to assist her in mounting),—showing his affection. Having that affection, he seeks to bring her near to him. It was by such reverence and affection for their wives that the ancient kings obtained the kingdom. In passing out from the great gate (of her father's house), he precedes, and she follows, and with this the right relation between husband and wife commences. The woman follows (and obeys) the man:—in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son. 'Man' denotes supporter. A man by his wisdom should (be able to) lead others.<sup>26</sup>

While the passage esteems reverence and affection for wives, it is all too easy for the wife/woman to be abused given how she is required to defer to the men in her life.

Filial conduct, deference, and accommodation all play out in the field of hierarchical relationships that constitute a person.<sup>27</sup> Of the five central relationships—ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son, older brother and younger brother, and friend and friend—three are centered on the family.<sup>28</sup> It is at home that one learns that being a good Confucian means endeavoring, within the family, to make ritual propriety and consummate conduct one's own and second nature. And in so doing one learns how to maneuver skillfully within the boundaries of the various roles—oldest sister, youngest brother,

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26 James Legge, trans. *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, edited by Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai. Vol. 1 (New York: University Books, 1967), 440–41. In personal correspondence on the question of deference, Nick Hudson makes the point that deference seems to be stressed more for women than men; and that this may be due to the paucity of specific prescriptions (*li* 禮) guiding the husband/wife relationship—which, again, sets her up for abuse. But as we can see in the quote from Master You, deference is of general importance in the Confucian relationships.

27 Except, perhaps, for the relationship between friend and friend, as it is not, strictly speaking, hierarchal. However, note that the *Book of Rites* says of a son, “He should serve one twice as old as himself as he serves his father, one ten years older than himself as an elder brother; with one five years older he should walk shoulder to shoulder, but (a little) behind him. When five are sitting together, the eldest must have a different mat (by himself).” Qu Li 1, 17. Thus, one would imagine the younger of two friends being called upon to defer to the older.

28 Perhaps ruler/subject is, as well, since the state is viewed as the family “writ large.” Thanks to Nicholas Hudson for this point.

wife, husband—as determined by ritual propriety. And from there one maps virtuous behavior from family to the broader society: “There is a common expression, ‘The Empire, the state, the family’. The Empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one’s own self.”<sup>29</sup> But whether one endeavors to be a good Confucian or not, in a Confucian familial context, one learns to be accommodating and deferential.

For those who have not grown up in such a context, it may be difficult to fully appreciate what this means, its possible depths and implications. Yen Mah, a Chinese woman (doctor and author), writes:

I never cared for my sister Lydia. As the oldest of seven children in our family, she was known to us as Da Jie 大姐 (Big Sister). She was often put in charge and would flaunt her authority. When I was little, she hectoring me mercilessly and often beat me.

After a long separation we met each other again. By then, a reversal of fortune had taken place. I was no longer the despised little sister whom she could bully at will, but a successful physician practicing in America. She, meanwhile, had been stuck in a loveless marriage in Communist China for thirty years. Although I was shocked by her downtrodden appearance and humble demeanor, all the familiar emotions of respect and fear re-emerged as soon as she uttered my childhood name, Wu Mei 五妹 (Fifth Younger Sister). Suddenly, I reverted to my former status. Respectfully, I called her Da Jie and dutifully agreed to do everything she asked. I do not trust her but was eager to please and felt compelled to help her although I could not understand why. I knew my sister was ruthless but not once did I consider refusing her. Perhaps my mind was so conditioned by Confucian concepts of *min fen* [sic] [“duty accorded by name”] that I could no longer think for myself.<sup>30</sup>

While we must be careful about what we conclude from the experience of one person, this quote is important in a number of ways.<sup>31</sup> First, it illustrates the way in which the hierarchical relationships in Confucianism constitute

29 *Mencius* 4A5.

30 Adeline Yen Mah, *Watching the Tree: A Chinese Daughter Reflects on Happiness, Tradition, and Spiritual Wisdom* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 53–54.

31 For examples of other women’s negative experiences in a Confucian context, see Nuyen, “Love and Respect in the Confucian Family.” It is important to emphasize that while this is but one example, it illustrates the points highlighted even if it is not representative of all or even a majority of women’s experiences. Thus, we have not sought to catalogue further examples.

*habituated and potentially unconscious* power inequalities. Second, it shows how a Confucian context can exist with its hierarchical relationships and deference in place, without that meaning that all parties are embodying Confucian virtues such as *ren* 仁 or *shu* 恕, “putting oneself in the other’s place.”<sup>32</sup> This latter point leads to a third, namely, that those who are in the lower position of power in a relationship are in a position of having to act, trusting that the other party will reciprocate—i.e., they make themselves further vulnerable. When one acts according to ritual propriety, one might be motivated by a sense of doing the right thing because it is the right thing or out of fear of remonstrations or punishment. Virtue would presumably require the former motivation, though it is probably too simplistic to think that we can so clearly delineate our motivations. If one acts according to ritual propriety because it is ritual propriety, then one would presumably act accordingly even when knowing the other person would not. And if one acts according to ritual propriety because of fear of remonstrations or punishment, only one of the two in the relationship has an immediate motivation because of the unequal power. This is the case even if, for example, the older sister can be reproached by a parent for being cruel to the younger sister.

Let us keep two points in mind. First, the various rites and observances of ritual propriety are rooted in and constitute the deferential nature of the Confucian relationships. Second, as we noted above, it is possible (if not likely) to have a Confucian context in which not everyone is a good Confucian. In such a context, the hierarchical Confucian relationships, characterized by their power inequality, are ripe for occurrences of intersectional oppression. The mixed variety of intersectional oppression that we are here concerned to clarify would come about from either a) the deference, accommodation, and power inequality in the Confucian context *intersecting* with other, not specifically Confucian, forms of oppression, or b) that context of deference, etc., together with specific norms of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) that embody oppression, *intersecting* with not specifically Confucian forms of oppression such as racism, classism, etc.

To be as clear as possible, the concern is this: in the quote from Yen Mah, her older sister was cruel to her. This cruelty was made possible, in part, by the hierarchical nature of their relationship. Whence the sister’s cruelty? We do not know. But replace the sister with either a person who is, or a system that is,

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32 See Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 194ff. for a helpful discussion of *shu*. Here is one example of its mention: “Zigong asked, ‘Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one’s days?’ The Master replied, ‘There is *shu* 恕: do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.’” (*Analects* 15.24)



racist and sexist and that racism and sexism may easily manifest intersectionally through the Confucian power inequality that characterizes the hierarchical relationships. Take, for example, the case of the Black women and GM. If we modify it so that it is a Confucian context, we can imagine a form of intersectional oppression that makes use of the power inequality of the Confucian understanding of the relationships. Imagine that Patricia, who is an accountant, is given tasks at work that fall outside of her job description, e.g., picking up her boss's children from kindergarten and taking them to a sitter every afternoon. Moreover, he gives these tasks to her because he thinks women are the ones who should deal with children and that picking them up is a servant's task, and Blacks, not whites, should be servants. In other words, she is given those tasks not because she is Black or because she is a woman, but because she is a Black woman. In a non-Confucian context, he would have power over her because he is her boss. Perhaps he has the power to fire her or deny her promotion. But in the Confucian context this is not the only power that he has. In the Confucian context Patricia's boss is in a ruler/minister type position and she is required to show the appropriate deference to and accommodation of his wishes, for if she does not, then she is being a bad Confucian.

However, we should note that in the *Xiaojing* (*The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*) we find:

... if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his father's part, a son has no choice but to remonstrate with his father, and if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his ruler's part, a minister has no choice but to remonstrate with his ruler. Hence, remonstrance is the only response to immorality. How could simply obeying the commands of one's father be deemed filial?<sup>33</sup>

We thus find explicit instruction that one is not being filial if one blindly obeys one's father or ruler when they are doing something reprehensible/questionable. To be filial requires remonstrating with them. Thus, Patricia would seem to have recourse to object to her treatment. However, we also find a similar passage in the *Analects*, but with an important addition:

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33 Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Roger T. Ames, trans. *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 114.



The Master said, “In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary. Although concerned, voice no resentment.”<sup>34</sup>

While this passage refers to the father and mother relationships, it is presumably safe to say that as the family is the locus of learning consummate, virtuous behavior, the same sort of procedure would apply outside the family. Thus, assuming she overcomes fear of retribution and speaks up (not necessarily a minor assumption), remonstrating with her boss, there is nothing that requires him to listen. However, in the end, she is required to defer to his judgment on the matter if she is to be a good Confucian, all while not exhibiting resentment.

One would hope that in a Confucian society characterized by harmony and virtue there would not be racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.<sup>35</sup> However, as we have seen, it is possible to have the hierarchical Confucian context with all of its power inequalities and insistence on deference while those in the positions of power abuse that power.<sup>36</sup> And that power is easily abused along (intersecting) lines of existing institutionalized oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, and sexual orientation, as well as the institutionalized oppression that can result from religious hegemony.<sup>37</sup> To be clear, the claim here is not that a Confucian context will *necessarily* give rise to such abuses. Rather, the claim is that the hierarchical nature of Confucian relationships creates institutionalized privilege on behalf of those in power. And that privilege can either be accompanied by reciprocity or by abuse. One form of abuse is intersectional oppression.

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34 *Analects* 4.18.

35 Assuming that sexism would be expunged from a contemporary formulation of Confucianism.

36 It cannot be stressed enough that we acknowledge that “those in power” needs to be understood carefully. Since a person’s position of power will depend on who the other is in the relationship, one cannot be said to be in a position of absolute power. The older brother has power over the younger siblings, but must accommodate and defer to the wishes of his father, uncle, and authorities outside the family, whether officials or older friends.

37 Think for example of the treatment of women and homosexuals in the history of Christianity, and its contemporary manifestations. We are grateful to Masato Ishida for reminding us of the importance of bringing into consideration oppression resulting from religion. We are grateful for his feedback and the general enthusiasm and feedback we received when presenting the core ideas of this paper at the 2014 University of Tokyo-University of Hawaii Summer Residential Institute in Comparative Philosophy.

Given the above, we believe we avoid the mistake that Rosenlee warns about:

... Confucianism should not be reduced to a set of hierarchical kinship and rigid gender roles, since in this reductionism one overlooks the dynamic aspect of Confucianism, whose ethical theory of *ren* 仁 as well as its emphasis on the lifelong project of self-cultivation and maintaining proper relations, at least at the theoretical level, are akin to the feminist ethic of care and its socially constructed self as a web of relations.<sup>38</sup>

We fully appreciate the ethical implications of *ren* 仁, and the other Confucian virtues, but that does not change, as we have tried to show, the potential for oppression that is inherent in the hierarchical nature of the Confucian understanding of relationships and persons. In this context we should note Ames's point that:

Confucius himself during his lifetime despaired at having yet to meet "anyone who is truly fond of consummate conduct" (*ren* 仁) or "anyone who is truly steadfast" (*gang* 剛), and it is unlikely that many consummate and steadfast persons who have reached Confucius's high expectations have lived in the interim.<sup>39</sup>

We are not suggesting that Confucianism is necessarily oppressive; however, while *ren* 仁 and the *junzi* 君子 (exemplary person), for example, may be ideals or goals in Confucianism, they presuppose the hierarchical relationships with their power inequalities. The possibility of a harmonious Confucian society, thus, presupposes the risk of those hierarchies being abused; and there is nothing in Confucianism that ensures they will not be abused.

In a similar vein, the threat of mixed intersectional oppression in the Confucian context does not require us to construe the hierarchies constituting the Confucian relationships as authoritarian. Regarding authoritarian worries, Nuyen notes that, "Conceptually, the Confucian notion of *li* seems to be the main source of the trouble."<sup>40</sup> In trying to defend Confucianism, and against the idea that *li* is the main culprit, Nuyen notes that the idea of the Three Bonds—"The minister serves the king, the son serves the father, and the wife

38 Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 16.

39 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 19.

40 Nuyen, "Love and Respect in the Confucian Family," 97.

serves the husband"<sup>41</sup>—which might seem to embody authoritarian inequality in favor of men, is actually from the Legalist text the *Hanfeizi*, and was only later incorporated into Confucianism, "... through the politicization of Confucianism during the Han dynasty and subsequently."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the Confucian text of the *Mencius* in specifying the five central Confucian relationships, says: "... between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity."<sup>43</sup> Regarding this, Nuyen writes:

It is interesting to note that righteousness governs only the relationship between the sovereign and the minister. The family relationships of father and son and husband and wife are governed respectively by affection, or love, and separateness, or distinction. For Mencius, then, "the proper relationship between [father and son] is mutual affection rather than one-way obedience." There is also mutuality in the husband-wife relationship. The "underlying spirit" in the governing principle of attention to separate functions "is not dominance but division of labor." It is no wonder that critics ignore the *Mencius* when it comes to textual support for the charges of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and domination.<sup>44</sup>

As a defense of the Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and *Mencius* to charges of one-sided authoritarianism, Nuyen's points are well-taken. However, the Confucian relationships, and the *li* and *ren* that govern/constitute them, need not be authoritarian or totalitarian in order for them to be conducive to various forms of oppression. As it is found in the *Analects* and the *Book of Rites*, for example, the separate functions of the husband and wife are delineated in such a way that there is a hierarchical power inequality. That inequality is sufficient, given human nature<sup>45</sup> and the fact that being a good Confucian

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41 Quoted in *ibid.*, 96.

42 *Ibid.*, 98.

43 Quoted in *ibid.*, 98.

44 *Ibid.*, 98.

45 We do not mean to lean too heavily on any claims about "human nature," as those are notoriously problematic. The point is simply an empirical one, namely, that humans seem to us to have a propensity for greed, particularly greed for power and control. The extent to which this is human nature and not learned nature resulting from our living in a capitalist economy is a good question.

is not so easily achieved, for abuses of power and intersectional oppression. As Nuyen helpfully points out:

... it may be insisted that despite what Confucius, Mencius, and other key Confucianists actually said, Confucianism has to be taken as a blend of what was said and the interpretations of what was said, not to mention the applications in daily life of the actual teachings and their interpretations.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, again, while consummate conduct (*ren* 仁) and the five relationships are centered around self-cultivation, mutual love, and support, in practice the nature of the hierarchical relationships and the traditional understanding of what *li* 禮 calls for, provide a context for mixed intersectional oppression. In light of this consider the following:

The Master said, "To cultivate harmony with all the kindred of parents may be pronounced filial! It is said in the *Book of Poetry* (11, vii, ode 9, 3), "Brethren whose virtue stands the test,  
By bad example still unchanged,  
Their generous feelings manifest,  
Nor grow among themselves estranged.  
*But if their virtue weakly fails,*  
*The evil influence to withstand,*  
*Then selfishness o'er love prevails,*  
*And troubles rise on every hand."*<sup>47</sup>

Those who are virtuous manifest generous feelings, but for those who are weak in virtue, their love is overcome by selfishness. That selfishness in the context of power inequality is a central worry in spite of the ideals found in the Confucian texts. We hope that it is clear in our line of argument that we are not claiming, explicitly or implicitly, that Confucianism is a "patriarchal ideology through and through,"<sup>48</sup> one necessarily characterized by male hegemony. The problem is that it need not be any of those things in order for mixed intersectional oppression to be a potential issue.

46 Ibid., 99.

47 Legge, Vol. 11, 290. Emphasis ours. According to Legge, we cannot suppose that this section of the *Liji* is derived from actual sayings of Confucius: "They are not in his style, and the reasonings are occasionally unworthy of him" (Legge 1967, Vol. 1, 42). Nevertheless, the ideas contained in this passage seem to us to be representative of Confucianism.

48 Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 16.

And, again, the mixed variety of intersectional oppression that we are here concerned to clarify would come about from either a) the deference, accommodation, and power inequality in the Confucian context *intersecting* with other, not specifically Confucian, forms of oppression, or b) that context of deference, etc., together with specific norms of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) that embody oppression, *intersecting* with not specifically Confucian forms of oppression such as racism, classism, etc. We have primarily focused on examples of a) because of the importance of the concept of deference to Confucian thought, but b) is another clear form of it.

## 6 Intrinsic Confucian Intersectional Oppression

The second main way in which intersectional oppression may manifest in the Confucian context is that it is possible that the demands of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), which govern/constitute the individual roles—ruler, older brother, friend, for example—give rise to intersectional oppression because of their specific, Confucian content. We take this sort of intrinsic oppression to be in the sense that people are usually concerned that sexism is a part of Confucianism. That is, the central way that Confucianism is taken to embody patriarchy and sexism is through the inequitable ways it specifies the roles, their duties, and what is appropriate to them. However, in light of intersectionality, we need to consider the possibility that ritual propriety, together with the hierarchical nature of the Confucian relationships that they specify, may produce intersecting modes of oppression beyond sexism in isolation. For example, in Confucianism we find sexism institutionalized in the demands of ritual propriety, this much is usually acknowledged. However, we also find embodied the requirement that the younger defer to the older. Just as there can be requirements for women that are not sexist and those that are sexist, there can be requirements for the younger to defer to the older that are just and those that are unjust, i.e., ones that amount to ageism. Thus, there could arise a case in which the youngest daughter experiences oppression along the intersecting lines of sexism and ageism. This would happen, for example, if she was unjustly denied something or unjustly punished, not because of being a woman or being young, but being a young woman.<sup>49</sup>

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49 It is, of course, an important question when discrimination based on age is unjust. We might, in fact, be less sure of our intuitions regarding it than those regarding when discrimination based on gender is unjust.

With what sounds as though it is an acknowledgement of intersectional concerns, Hall and Ames write about what they call the Chinese correlative model of sexism, which we will address in detail below:

Another feature of the correlative model is that the male/female complementarity cannot be divorced from other significant correlations. As Guisso observes:

If the *Five Classics* fostered the subordination of woman to man, they fostered even more the subordination of youth to age. Thus, in every age of Chinese history where Confucianism was exalted, the woman who survived, the woman who had age and the wisdom and experience which accompanied it, was revered, obeyed and respected . . . even if her son were an emperor. It is perhaps this fact more than any other, which enabled the woman of traditional China to accept for so long the status imposed upon her.

If we begin from the assumption that humanity is an achievement, age becomes a significant factor. Woman achieves status by growing old. However, a simple-minded reverence for the aged is not to be encouraged. Confucius himself says repeatedly that age in the absence of achievement should be a source of embarrassment. . . .<sup>50</sup>

The point made by Hall and Ames that the male/female cannot be divorced from the old/young is very much an intersectional one. While an older woman without achievement would be an embarrassment, a young woman would be in an unfortunate place as well, since she is at the intersection of age and gender. Our point here is to illustrate that when thinking about the ways in which sexism manifests in Confucianism, we need to have an eye open to unique forms that cannot be seen when looking at sexism independently of other modes of oppression.

From a feminist perspective, part of the importance of the intersectional approach is to become more aware of the ways in which oppression against women can manifest. Aside from the usually mentioned sexism, there are also racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, cissexism,<sup>51</sup> ableism, and discrimination based on religion, nationality, or perceived ethnicity.<sup>52</sup> By intersectional lights, sexism can manifest in forms that are unidentifiable as pure forms of sexism; moreover, the lived experience of an oppressed woman is never that

50 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 97–98.

51 Discrimination against persons whose gender does not match their biological sex.

52 And this list is not intended to be exhaustive.

of simply being a woman. Given all of the modes of oppression that have been identified, there are a great many possibilities. That is, of course, not to say that we will find or are even likely to find them all in Confucianism. The importance of taking an intersectional approach to Confucianism is that we can be blind to intersectional forms of oppression unless we are aware of their very possibility and the ways in which they may manifest. As Chenyang Li notes, not enough attention has been paid to Confucianism in regard to feminist concerns.<sup>53</sup> While this situation seems to be improving, it appears to us that attention is paid to concerns of sexism as a singular, independent mode of oppression. But in light of Black Feminist thought, and what we have seen so far, it is clear that that approach is inadequate if we are concerned with the status and rights of women, and oppression more generally.

A further aspect of the importance of oppression in the Confucian context, particularly in relation to intrinsic intersectional oppression, is that persons are constituted by their relations. And, thus, oppression that is rooted in the nature of those relationships strikes at the heart of the person's existence. For example, a Black lesbian who experiences oppression at the intersection of being Black and being a lesbian experiences oppression at the core of her being. This is not to essentialize race or sexual orientation. It is simply to point out that those aspects of her lived life are central to her *daily* lived experience.<sup>54</sup> This is in contrast to someone, say, a white heterosexual male who is made fun of by his friends for regularly wearing black and blue together. While his wardrobe may be central to his lived identity, it is difficult to imagine it being central in the way that being Black or being a lesbian would be. This is in large part because of the level of choice that is involved in picking one's wardrobe. Its being a matter of choice is, of course, not the only, or even the main, difference between the Black lesbian and white heterosexual male with the black and blue wardrobe. The former but not the latter's oppression is institutionalized and systemic in a way that the making fun of the black and blue wardrobe is not. Analogously, being the youngest daughter is a central aspect of a woman's personhood in the Confucian context, and in the Confucian context we have a potentially analogous form of institutionalized oppression. That is, given the "institutional" nature of the Confucian relationships, her oppression along those lines can be considered institutionalized, particularly if it is a result of

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53 For example, in Li, *The Sage and the Second Sex*.

54 The extent to which they must be is an important question. In a society in which there is no racial or sexual orientation oppression, those aspects *may* be less central to her lived existence.

the normative prescriptions of ritual propriety. And, thus, oppression that is rooted in those relational aspects of her being is particularly pernicious.

## 7 A Further Complication: Women and the Question of Personhood

We need to take seriously the uniquely Chinese Confucian form of sexism that ultimately denies full personhood to women. Personhood in the Confucian context is not an automatically given status that a member of homo sapiens receives in virtue of being homo sapiens. As Rosenlee nicely summarizes, “The virtue of *ren* is the defining characteristic of Confucian personhood; the category of ‘person’ is an achieved, ethical category, instead of an a priori ontological category.”<sup>55</sup> This aspect of Confucianism, however, opens up a new avenue of oppression. In contrast to the West where a woman must embody masculine character traits to be considered fully human, in China:

... the realized person has been broadly defined as an achieved harmony of the full range of human traits and dispositions. Male dominance is a consequence of sexual differentiation into male and female that has tended to exclude the female from the achievement of becoming human. Thus, the male has been free to pursue the task of realizing his personhood though [sic] the creation of an androgynous personality.

The distinctive feature of the Chinese conception of gender is that were, *per impossibile*, the female to be allowed freedom to pursue realized personhood, she could do this by seeking a harmony of the same range of human traits that the male employs as standard. Chinese sexism, which denies to the female the possibility of becoming a human being, is brutal in the extreme. However, the model available to avoid continued brutality might be more humane than is the Western model. The status of women in Western cultures might be deemed less humbling, but the means of becoming truly human advertise a more subtle kind of dominance. To be human you must be male.<sup>56</sup>

Hall and Ames’s analysis of Chinese vs. Western sexism makes for an extraordinarily interesting, and troubling, complication. We do not want to take it as obviously correct or uncontentious; however, there is not space here to

55 Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 35.

56 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 81–82.



adequately discuss its correctness.<sup>57</sup> Assuming that Hall and Ames are broadly correct in their analysis regarding a woman's inability to achieve full personhood in the Chinese Confucian context, we find that there are still further intersectional concerns—*ones that cut across our mixed and intrinsic forms of intersectional oppression*.

In the context of mixed intersectional oppression, this further intersectional concern is the result of combining the denial of full personhood with other forms of oppression such as racism. With the denial of full personhood, a Black woman is not just black and a woman, she is a Black woman who lacks full personhood and who is thus in the position of being judged less deserving of respect, office, achievements, etc.<sup>58</sup> And while our understanding of what it is to advocate a contemporary, non-oppressive Confucianism might imply the dissolution of Western racism, there is presumably still the possibility of other forms of racism that could take root. There was, after all, discrimination in

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57 For a similar approach to women and persons, see Watson, Rubie S., "The Name and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society," *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986): 619–31. Rosenlee grounds the inability of women to achieve full personhood in the "... structural limitation derived from the concept of *nei-wai* as a gender based division of labor..." (Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 35). In the *Book of Filial Piety for Women*, it is made clear that while a woman may influence the world outside the home positively or negatively through her relationship with her husband and family ("She sets an example of rectitude and virtue, and her husband enthusiastically copies it"), it also makes clear that her place is in the home and her duty is to her husband and family. In addition to extolling the virtues of purity, obedience, absence of jealousy, it also counts as a virtue "absence of contact with the outside" and we are told that while, "... the husband has a hundred actions, the wife has a single purpose" (Mann and Cheng, *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, 59–60). Thus, when being filial, a woman's role and duties do limit the full range of her activities and the possibility of her fully cultivating the same range of relationships that a male would be able to cultivate. This would seem to lend support to the claim that women, by and large, are denied the possibility of achieving the same sort of personhood (*ren* 仁) that a man can achieve.

58 The situation is potentially even worse, since even without the Confucian issues regarding women and personhood, Blacks in the United States, for example, may feel less than human. Describing her early college experience, bell hooks writes: "We need more autobiographical accounts of the first generation of black students to enter predominantly white schools, colleges, and universities. Imagine what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human. Imagine what it is like to be taught by teachers who do believe that they are racially superior, and who feel that they should not have to lower themselves by teaching students whom they really believe are incapable of learning." bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

traditional China along ethnic lines, e.g., the Han discriminating against the non-Han minorities. Writing about the dangers of the Chinese, correlative model of sexism vs. the dualistic Western model, Hall and Ames note:

In the absence of some essential nature that guarantees the sanctity of all human life, there is justification for worshipping some human beings while abusing others as chattel. In the dualistic model, one may argue that a woman has not been permitted to be a man. In the correlative scheme, females have historically not been allowed to be persons.<sup>59</sup>

A question that is similar to ones we raised earlier raises its head at this point: to what extent must Confucianism bring with it the Chinese form of sexism identified by Hall and Ames? Our goal is not to answer this question, but to raise it in the context of clarifying the complex nature of oppression in the Confucian context. It is our belief, though we shall not argue it here, that Confucianism need not bring with it the particularly Chinese version of sexism identified by Hall and Ames.

Nevertheless, as hopeful as we might be about the possibilities to be found in Confucian thought, we must not forget that the hierarchical nature of relationships grounds and exacerbates the Chinese form of sexism in a way that is not so easily dealt with:

... there is a persistent worry in the project of woman's liberation in a Chinese society. Unlike the dualistic model in which some equality can be sought by recourse to a woman assuming the gender traits of a man, there is no such basis for essential equality in the correlative structure. Hierarchy would seem to be inevitable. The only possibility that might seem acceptable would be a qualitative hierarchy where status is a

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59 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 97. As de Beauvoir notes: "The categories masculine and feminine appear as symmetrical in a formal way on town hall records or identification papers. The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word *vir* being assimilated into the general meaning of the word 'homo.' Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity. . . . In fact, just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical that defined the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 5.

function of nongendered personal achievement rather than biological sex or cultural gender.<sup>60</sup>

This passage suggests an important line of inquiry: What aspects of Confucianism are essential to it? Does it require a particular way of understanding hierarchical relationships? Is it possible to have Confucianism without the hierarchies? Let us turn now to a brief consideration of these issues.

## 8 Confucianism without Hierarchies and Deference?

A large portion of our argument has been based on the fact that Confucianism centers around hierarchical relationships, ones characterized by power inequalities. However, as Joel Kupperman does,<sup>61</sup> we might question whether or not Confucius' ethics really requires hierarchies of the kind we find, for example, in the five main relationships. That is, might we not make sense of both *deference* and *ritual* without true power inequality? After all, we have ways of deferring to others in contemporary societies that do not require power inequalities, e.g., right of way laws for cars, trucks, buses, bicycles, etc. Moreover, we could even welcome some power inequalities of the form of parents over children without that requiring or implying that all other relations are hierarchical. Lastly, regarding deference, we might note, following Ames's discussion of *shu* 恕, that deference may be understood not merely as giving way to another's higher authority (power) but a matter of both, "... deferring action until we overcome uncertainty in our moral inquiry, and ... taking under consideration the interests of others in that process."<sup>62</sup> Taking consideration of others' interests can be a matter of knowing their personal details and interests, but it can also be a matter of interests tied to roles and to general aspects of being human. Thus, as a student, we might defer to a teacher *qua* her role as teacher because she is an authority on something that we have an

60 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 99.

61 Two questions he asks are, 1) Are "the classical Confucian philosophers ... right in holding that an effective system of ritual requires differentiated social roles"? and, 2) "would whatever is valuable in the Confucian approach be preserved if we inserted the assumption that women and men are in general equally important and equally deserving of respect and deference?" Joel Kupperman "Feminism as Radical Confucianism: Self and Tradition." In *The Sage and the Second Sex*, edited by Chenyang Li, 43–56 (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 49.

62 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 196.

interest in learning and because she has an interest in teaching. It is not that she is more powerful or above us, but given our interests and hers, we are deferential. Further, as a student defers to the interests of the teacher (and, in a sense, her interest in learning), so, too, the teacher defers to the interests of the students (i.e., learning) and her interests in teaching. She defers to their interests by doing her utmost to teach well, i.e., she does her utmost to be prepared, not show favorites, not unjustly punish students, etc. What is key would be to have neither party's interests rank as more important than the others. The interests of the teacher and the interests of the students are equally important; in this way we allow for deference without power inequality. Further, in this way, we might be able to have a Confucianism that defines all roles by the interests that those roles entail pursuing for both members of the relationship. Regarding the interests rooted in basic humanity, we might defer to a person's need to eat, or her family's need, by not taking more than our share. Similar deferential duties would follow naturally from other basic human interests, for example, clothing, shelter, and preservation of life.

We already find a concept/virtue in Confucius's ethics that pertains to a more egalitarian understanding of roles and deference. That is, central to the *Analects* is an emphasis on *shu* 恕 or "putting oneself in the other's place." In *Analects* 4.15 we find Master Zeng saying, "The way of the Master is doing one's utmost and putting oneself in the other's place, nothing more." This calls for the imagination to come into play as we try to put ourselves in another's place. Using the above student/teacher example, the student defers to the teacher, in part, through attempting to imagine what it is like to be what she is not: "If I were interested in teaching, what would I want from my students?" Such a task would surely require "doing one's utmost" (*zhong* 忠) and would take some time to refine. But given that ritual propriety (and, by implication, consummate conduct) requires more than merely applying a set of rules to a given situation, it is not surprising that *shu* 恕 is such an important concept.<sup>63</sup>

Applying these considerations to our concern for intersectional oppression in the Confucian context, the idea would be to make clear and equitable the interests assigned to the different roles one might inhabit so that, for example, it is not the case that we define the interests of the wife as running the household and the interests of the husband as making money and having a good time. Doing this in a way that does not require a rigid specification of

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63 In *Analects* 2.8, for example, Confucius makes clear the importance of countenance and not simply doing one's duty. Another example would be *Analects* 2.3, where Confucius emphasizes the importance of shame and achieving order through instilling a sense of shame over a fear of punishment.

either taking care of the household or going off to work for either husband or wife would be important if we want to avoid making it such that all women, as wives, do the same thing, namely, stay at home *or* go to work *or*. . . . With this example alone we begin to see the difficulties faced by trying to respect contemporary feminist concerns while respecting the central Confucian insight of achieving a harmonious society through (in part) roles defined by ritual propriety. That is not to say that it cannot be done. However, it is not our purpose to attempt any further progress on the issue here. Our purpose has been to emphasize the importance of calling into question the hierarchies and power inequalities of Confucius' ethics, while suggesting a possible route to another way of making sense of deference without power inequality and essentializing along gender lines.

We can further see the importance of doing so by taking note of recent empirical work done regarding empathy and power. In "Social Class, Contextualism, and Empathic Accuracy," researchers tested the hypothesis that "individuals of a lower social class are more empathically accurate in judging the emotions of other people."<sup>64</sup> The studies seem to confirm the hypothesis, suggesting that people in positions of greater (upper class) power are less capable of empathy. This *might* suggest that those who are in positions of power over others would have more difficulty truly enacting *shu* 恕. Another study concerned the role of mirror neurons in our interactions. Among other things, mirror neurons are supposed to help ground our attunement with the behavior of others and *may* be particularly important for empathy.<sup>65</sup> What researchers have found is that those who have been primed in the experiments to be in a position of power had much less mirror neuron activity when observing others in lesser positions of power. Two of the authors summarize their findings by saying:

Does this mean that the powerful are heartless beings incapable of empathy? Hardly. Recall that we induced power in our participants randomly. This sort of manipulation cannot fundamentally change empathic capability. So the bad news is that the powerful are, by default and at a neurological level, simply not motivated to care. But the good news is that they are, in theory, redeemable.<sup>66</sup>

64 Kraus, Michael W., Stéphane Côté, and Dacher Keltner, "Social Class, Contextualism, and Empathic Accuracy," *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): *abstract*.

65 Inzlicht, Michael and Sukhvinder S. Obhi, "Powerful and Coldhearted." *The New York Times Sunday Review*. July 25th (2014): Accessed online on July 28th, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/powerful-andcoldhearted.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/powerful-andcoldhearted.html?_r=0).

66 Ibid.

We, of course, have to be *extremely* careful with such findings and their interpretation; however, if the above findings were to bear out, then they could have important implications for Confucian thought—in particular the issue we’ve been addressing regarding the necessity of power inequality in Confucius’ ethics. As a cautionary note regarding the above findings, it might well be that in a Confucian context in which children are raised from the beginning to be deferential and considerate of others, people’s basic “empathetic capability” would be much higher than the presumably non-Confucian test subjects.

Again, it has not been our aim to answer the questions we’ve posed about the necessity of power inequalities. We take them, instead, to be points of departure for further work on Confucianism in relation to oppression. Nevertheless, as we have tried to indicate above, we are optimistic regarding the ability of Confucianism to adjust to the evolving concerns of feminists, philosophers, and feminist philosophers. As Ames writes, “. . . Confucianism has been appropriated, commented upon, reinterpreted, and reauthorized by each of some eighty generations of Chinese scholars and intellectuals that across the ages have contributed their own best thoughts to this ‘literati learning’ as a continuous, living tradition.”<sup>67</sup> May it continue to evolve in positive directions.

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67 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 1.

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