

The Influence of Confucianism on the Role of Women in the New Era

Yiran Cheng

The Affiliated High School to Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310012, China
shelan@ldy.edu.rs

Abstract. Confucian emphasis on gender roles has led to the formation of gender stereotypes and deepened the solidification of people's cognition of gender roles. In ancient China, all the daily life of women was almost confined to the family, and they hardly had any social life. Caring for their husband and teaching their children is an inevitable and fixed track in their lives. The concept of gender roles in Confucian thought still affects the division of labor of modern women and modern families. This influence is hidden and profound, because Confucianism has always occupied a pivotal position in Chinese civilization. This paper aims to explore whether Confucianism has continued to influence people's gender concepts and social division of labor since traditional Chinese culture was once again promoted, and what kind of influence women have been subjected to in this context. The paper argues that Confucianism, as an important part of Chinese traditional culture, needs to adapt to the current feminist trend and make corresponding changes.

Keywords: Confucianism, gender, social roles.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the role of Chinese women is undergoing a subtle shift because of rising divorce rates and falling fertility rates. Society increasingly encourages women to return to the family, making the balance between career and family an important issue for modern women. In the context of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is important to discuss whether the influence made by Confucianism and other traditional Chinese cultures on people's cognition of gender has made it even more difficult for women to balance their careers and family. Historically, Chinese women have always been in an inferior position: low level of education, low social discourse power, and they were restricted by strict ethical standards. In fact, one of the most powerful ideological backup forces of this situation is the concept of gender roles in Confucianism. In the Confucian view of gender, people are separated by their gender and given different roles to play depending on their gender [1]. Thus, people's lives are decided more by external rules rather than internal wills.

Actually, Confucianism has always played an important role in the Chinese history. Emperor Wudi of Han (156-87 BC) accepted Dong Zhongshu's suggestion and declared in 136 BC that "all schools of thought should be dismissed and Confucianism should be respected", establishing Confucianism as the dominant state ideology and orthodoxy. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, the imperial examination system became the main method for selecting officials. The imperial examination based mainly on Confucian classics. After that, Neo-Confucianism was established by Zhu Xi and others in the Song Dynasty, systematically combing Confucian classics with Buddhism and Taoism. The mind theory of Wang Yangming in the Ming Dynasty further enriched the connotation of Confucianism and spread widely in society. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism has significantly influenced people's thoughts, including gender roles.

Although Confucian culture was undervalued or even criticized in the early days of the People's Republic of China, it has strongly returned to public attention in the past decade. The China Dream is an important guiding ideology and important governing philosophy proposed by the President of China, Jinping Xi, in 2012. Xi defined it as achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. He suggests that the inheritance, promotion, and prosperity of civilization make the Chinese dream come true. The rejuvenation of a nation needs strong material force as well as strong spiritual force [2]. Also, scholar Jianxiong Ge believes that to realize the Chinese dream, China needs to concentrate

all resources and mobilize all positive factors, and traditional culture is a major resource, which is also the most conducive to mobilizing the positive factors of Chinese people [3]. Thus, the year of 2012 was a crucial moment when Chinese traditional cultures such as Confucianism regained public attention. The influence of Confucianism on society has expanded since then.

This paper explores whether Confucianism has continued to influence gender concepts and the social division of labor since the resurgence of traditional Chinese culture. It examines the impact on women in this era. At the same time, the paper also focuses on how Confucian culture, as an important part of Chinese traditional culture, adapts to the current feminist trend and makes corresponding changes.

2. Gender Role Ethics in Ancient Confucianism

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote in her book that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman [4].” A woman is not entirely created when she is born; instead, her upbringing gradually shapes her. Women acquire their roles from men and other members of society; biology has little involvement in this. Women are not inherently submissive, secondary, or unnecessary; rather, external factors have worked together to shape this view of them [4]. In ancient China, Confucianism was a prominent way to mold women into ‘women’. Women were expected to adhere to the “three obediences”: listen to their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their son after the husband’s death. This makes women live their whole lives in the shadow of men. Women were also expected to have good virtue, speech, appearance, and skills as well. In Confucian culture, gender is often associated with social roles [5]. The harmonious society depicted in the Book of Rites is one in which men have a job title and women have a husband to rely on. The social division of gender roles in ancient China was “men lead outside, women lead inside.” Women’s life activities mostly take place in the context of their families, which also happens to be the setting in which their worth is acknowledged. Confucianism denigrates women’s rights and autonomy while placing a great deal of emphasis on the needs of the husband-power household and the many responsibilities that women must fulfill [6].

Scholar Fang Xudong pointed out that this social division of labor is because ancient China was an agricultural society [1]. In agrarian societies, the power of the body itself was the main productive force, and men did tend to have more physical power than women. In order to have a better quality of life, men tend to mainly focus on creating labor value outside, while women naturally become the one who runs the housework at home. Moreover, Fang pointed out that the influence of Confucian culture on ancient Chinese women is not only reflected in the social division of labor, but also reflected in the marriage and family structure [1]. Ancient China practiced monogamy with multiple concubines. Women were separated into two groups to meet men’s different needs: Wives play the role of wise wives and good mothers, managing the household chores for their husbands and educating their children. Concubines, on the other hand, are more likely to be objects of desire or to have more children. In addition, child brides were also common in ancient China. Child brides grow up in their in-laws’ homes, and their in-laws often do not treat them as their own daughters, but teach them how to serve their husbands from an early age.

On the other hand, some scholars believe that the status of women in ancient times was not as low as most people think. In particular, the role of the mother often has a lot of power in the family. They pointed out that although under the influence of Confucianism, women have lost their voice and status in the public sphere, but they have a very large voice in the family, and can even be regarded as the real “master” of the private sphere (family). Mencius’ mother is a good example. After losing her husband, she did not obey and listen to her son, as in the Confucian tradition [7]. Instead, she showed absolute power in the education of Mencius and moved three times in order for him to learn better. However, some scholars pointed out that the status of ancient women was often only reflected in the family, and they did not have much say in society. Lin Yutang, in his book *The Chinese*, remarked, ‘Among all the rights of women, the greatest one is to be a mother, especially in terms of duty.’

In summary, Confucian culture imposed various restrictions on ancient women. There is a standard female paradigm in Confucian culture, and women need to play their gender roles and obligations at all times. They are not considered to be independent individuals but rather as daughters, wives, mothers, and many other family roles throughout their lives. They had limited social life and experiences numerous constraints.

3. The Shaping of Female Role in Modern New Confucianism

Since 2012, traditional Chinese culture has regained significant respect, with Confucian culture returning to the public's vision, largely due to the announcement of the China Dream. Under these circumstances, it is worth exploring whether Confucian culture continues to influence and restrict women in present society.

China is currently in the midst of a declining fertility rate and an aging population. In 2021, China implemented a "three-child policy" to encourage couples to have more children, thereby improving the population structure and promoting economic and social development. In a speech at the 13th National Women's Congress in 2023, Ding stressed that Chinese women should 'study and implement Xi Jinping cultural ideas' and 'establish correct values on marriage, family, and fertility.' By emphasizing women's role in reproduction, the Chinese government no longer pays lip service to gender equality and implies that women should adopt a "correct" view of marriage and family. This shows that the government is intensifying efforts to promote a more pro-birth and traditional view of gender relations through local governments and party organizations such as the All-China Women's Federation [8].

When fertility rates need to be raised, the Chinese government's approach is to educate women to focus on family and fertility, rather than both genders. This may also be influenced by the orientation of gender roles in Confucianism. In their search for measures, government officials may have tacitly accepted the gender division of labor, believing that the problem of declining fertility can be solved simply by changing women's minds. Men, on the other hand, need to do their jobs and do not need to participate in family life. This ignores the fact that bearing and raising children is a shared responsibility of both men and women, and arguably makes the reproductive environment worse, because men would assume that they do not need to pay attention to the family, or do not need to pay attention to the family as much as women do. Now, unlike in ancient China, women mostly have their own jobs. In situations where both men and women need to work, society often requires women to take more care of the family, which may be part of the reason for the declining fertility rate.

Society's shaping of women's roles is also reflected in its expectations of women. Although there are differences in degree, the assumption that women care more about their families than men do not seem to have changed since ancient times. The difference is that modern society expects successful women to have both a good career and a happy family. These days, working for money is a gender-neutral thing. The paradox is that women are already creating value through their own abilities, but they often cannot achieve social success in the same way that men can. Society's expectation for women seems to have shifted to creating value at work while taking care of everything at home.

In short, it is evident that modern Chinese women are no longer restricted in family activities as they were in the past; they have become active in the public field and begun to have their own voice. However, women's roles have not entirely escaped the influence of the Confucian gender division of labor, as they are still expected to take on more family responsibilities than men. At the same time, the Chinese government is encouraging women to return to the family in the hope of addressing the declining fertility rate.

4. Adapting Confucian Culture to Modern Society

Although some scholars believe that there are many similarities between Confucian ethics and feminist caring ethics, in real life, women are often restricted by Confucian culture [9]. The

overemphasis on women's motherhood means that the value of women as independent individuals is easily overlooked. Some Chinese people like to say, "If a woman never gives birth, her life will be incomplete." This is consistent with the emphasis placed on the role of the mother in Confucian culture. But women, or all people, cannot be defined by any identity and should not be bound by any label. With the awakening of female consciousness, the gender concept in Confucian thought urgently needs to be changed to better adapt to the pace of social development.

The gender division of labor in Confucian culture is no longer applicable to today's society. Nowadays, Chinese people no longer rely mainly on farming for a living, so the social division of labor of "men in charge of outside work and women in charge of inside work", which serves the farming society, is no longer needed. Ranjoo Seodu Herr argues that the core concepts of Confucian culture can be reinterpreted to suit today's society [10]. For example, *ren*, the core Confucian virtue, can be defined as a goal shared by all members of the family. It is not necessary to presuppose the division of labor by gender, but to combine the reality of the couple to discuss the specific division of labor. Women can be more concentrated in the public sphere and men can be more concentrated in the family sphere. Because gender is shaped, there is virtually no such thing as women being born better at housework and men being born more suited to be active in social work. Part of gender equality is achieved when people let go of gender stereotypes and embrace what they are really good at and fit for.

Moreover, the difference between men and women in Confucian culture makes men and women have completely different social tasks. Men and women do not understand each other, and gender isolates people to a large extent, which easily causes antagonistic emotions. But the good development of a society should be based on mutual respect and understanding between different groups. The Confucian classic "Doctrine of the Mean" once mentioned that "to achieve neutrality, the position of heaven, and all things are cultivated", emphasizing that harmony is the basis for the operation of heaven and earth. People can borrow the concept of "harmony" in Confucian culture to advocate dialogue and communication between men and women. Gender stereotypes in Confucian culture not only bind women, but also men, albeit to a much lesser extent. Confucianism should return to the ethical responsibility and obligation advocated by the original Confucianism, and add the concept of equality and justice between men and women in the modern sense [11]. Only when people truly understand the consequences of such rigid gender roles and try to put them down can the gender gap be slowly eliminated, thus creating a more harmonious and equal society.

In conclusion, in today's society, gender no longer holds the same defining significance that Confucian culture used to attribute to it. Confucian culture should work towards eliminating the gender stereotypes deeply rooted in people's minds, so as to better conform to the trend of the development of the time.

5. Conclusion

The influence of Confucian culture in China is vast and far-reaching. Starting from the aspect of gender roles, this paper expounds how women are subjected to multiple restrictions in the family and society in the ancient Chinese Confucian concept of gender. Women were considered unfit to participate in anything in the public sphere, and instead were stuck at home with husbands and children, spending their lives in busy domestic tasks. Even at home, even though women make significantly more contributions than men in the domestic sphere, women have little say in the family.

In modern China, women are no longer simply stuck at home, and they begin to participate in various activities and work in society. However, because of the profound influence of Confucian gender roles, women are often expected to take care of the family more than men, and women are often asked to compromise in the conflict between career and family. This is well reflected by the concept of the Chinese Dream was put forward. The government is eager to increase the fertility rate, and the measures they adopt are trying to change women's views on marriage and fertility and persuading women to return to the family. This seems to be a repeat of Confucian gender roles

throughout history. This suggests that the influence of Confucian culture is still rooted in China, bringing new challenges for women in the new era, such as being forced to choose between the workplace and the family, or the work in the family field is still considered obligatory.

Confucian culture, as one of the most far-reaching ideological systems in China, needs to evolve to better adapt to modern social development. Confucian gender roles cause alienation in today's society. If society gradually abandons these gender roles based on stereotypes, both women and men can live more authentically. Men would be free to express their emotions, and women could showcase their leadership. Moreover, traditional Confucian concepts can be reinterpreted. In this new era, people can improve the status of women and promote gender equality by offering new interpretations of Confucian texts. In this way, outdated elements of traditional culture can be discarded, allowing it to thrive with renewed vitality in Chinese society.

References

- [1] Fang Xudong. Confucianism, Taoism, and the Present Society. Beijing: Beijing Book Co. Inc., 2022, 241-261.
- [2] Xi Jinping. "Creating New Glories for Chinese Culture: On Building a Socialist Cultural Powerhouse". People's Daily, September 9, 2014. Accessed on August 12, 2024. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0709/c40531-25256140.html>.
- [3] Ge Jianxiong. Use Excellent Traditional Chinese Cultural Resources to Explain and Publicize the Chinese Dream, 2015. <https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2015/2015-11-30/259239.html>.
- [4] Simone de Beauvoir. The Second Sex. UK: Vintage Books, 2006.
- [5] Yu Guangjun. The humanistic gender view of Confucianism. Journal of China Women's University, 2016 (5): 97-102.
- [6] Peng Hua and Du Bangyun. Three theoretical perspectives of Confucian female Angle ethics, Philosophy Dynamics, 2013 (10): 5.
- [7] Zhang Lili. The diversity of female images from the perspective of Confucianism. Contemporary Confucianism, 2022 (21): 257-62.
- [8] Carl Minzner. Beijing's Message to the National Women's Congress: Gender Equality Is Out, Family and Childbirth Are In, 2023. Accessed on August 12, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/beijings-message-national-womens-congress-gender-equality-out-family-and-childbirth-are>.
- [9] Zhang Rongnan. Is Confucianism compatible with feminism. Contemporary Confucianism, 2022 (21): 243-50.
- [10] Ranjoo Seodu Herr. Confucian family for a feminist future, Asian Philosophy, 2012, 22 (4): 327-46.
- [11] Peng Hua. The Ethical Identity of the Female in Confucianism, Studies in Ethics, 2014 (2): 98-103.