

Lijun Yuan

*Confucian Ren and Feminist Ethics of Care: Integrating Relational Self, Power, and Democracy*

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*Reviewed by Joshua Mason, 2020*

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Quote:

Situating *ren* in the relational ontology of heaven, earth, and humanity, and in the reciprocal ethics of *zhong* and *shu*, this book shows where Confucianism can speak the language of feminism, equality, and democracy.

This book puts contemporary feminist ideas into dialogue with the Confucian tradition. The author, Lijun Yuan, describes it as "3a practical approach to applied ethics" (1). While aiming for political and practical goals, it digs into theories of unity, selfhood, relationships, justice, care, and democracy. These concepts, as elaborated in the tradition of care ethics, invite comparison, contrast, and possibly integration with the Confucian ideal of *ren* 仁 (benevolence, humaneness, goodness, care). *Ren* sits at the center of the Confucian ethical vocabulary, Yuan's source material for thinking about how to meliorate contemporary social injustices. Yuan's driving question is whether Confucian ethics has what it takes to carry through the liberatory goals of feminism. She writes, "Specifically, I will explore whether traditional Confucianism has the resources to argue for sex/gender equality in its universal *ren* or *care*" (5).

If the ideas of care ethics are going to have a practical impact on gender equality in China and throughout East Asia, they will have to interact with the conceptual framework of *ren*. About 500 million women speak Chinese, in which *ren* is the cultural ideal that has been the core of Confucian moral theory for thousands of years. If this concept can be incorporated into the articulation of theories of care ethics and feminist social movements, and if these movements can inform the articulation of *ren* in Chinese circles, this kind of exchange has a tremendous practical upside.

Yuan introduces the book with a strong case for urgent action against the injustices of gender inequality. In China over the past fifty years, there have been dramatic transformations and many advances in women's roles in society. However, Yuan points to reversing trends since the 1990s as Chinese women have slid backwards in terms of pay and overall employment relative to men. She also points to the lack of women in leadership positions in government and in big business, and the disproportionate burden of home care women take on. These concrete inequalities lead Yuan to question the capacity of Confucian philosophy to overcome persistent gender disparities in social expectations, economic achievement, and political power.

The first section is on "Ontological Oneness" and is divided into two chapters. The first chapter, "Strength and Weakness of Early Confucian Ethics on Women," reviews the early Confucian texts and their attitudes toward gender. It provides some context for understanding the Chinese vocabulary and identifies key philosophers who expressed the general cultural attitude toward women and their proscribed roles in society. It goes over the transformation of the ideas of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 from cosmological forces in the earlier texts to a more rigid hierarchy of gender, as well as the power of *li* 礼 (ritual, good manners, norms) in shaping the expectations of women's social behavior. Yuan recognizes the traditional patriarchal hierarchies that have worked against Confucianism as a modern feminist option, but she is optimistic that Confucian values of openness, inclusiveness,

and shared responsibility in caring for every person's needs means that "it is possible to integrate Confucian *ren* and recent developments in feminist care ethics" (25).

In the second chapter, "A Debate about *Minben* and *Minzhu*: Toward Caring Democracy," Yuan "explores whether *ren* is or is not compatible with the social ideal of democracy and gender equality" (27). In this turn toward politics, she is committed to democracy as an egalitarian ideal, and to gender equity in actual political power. She addresses the debate between advocates of *minben*, which Yuan calls "people-oriented," and those who promote *minzhu*, "democracy." *Minben* is associated with the traditional Confucian absolute monarch, one who is benevolent and takes the happiness of the people and their support as the roots of his own success. *Minzhu* literally means "the people lead," and is equated with Western democracy. Yuan's take is that the *minben* people-oriented politics is where *ren* comes in and therefore has great value, but this is still a step on the way to broader *minzhu* democracy.

The second section of the book is on "Methodological Dimensions," and has three chapters. The first of these is "Feminist Critiques of Gender Inequality and Ethics of Care." Here Yuan describes important debates and contributions to the literature on care ethics, covering ground from Carol Gilligan's classic work to arguments among contemporary bloggers. Yuan sketches the contrasting positions and offers her own take on such issues as other-regardingness, essentialism, relational selfhood, intersectionality, and extending care beyond the family to the broader society.

The next chapter addresses the concept of "reciprocity" as it appears in Chinese, traditional Western, and feminist thinkers. The Confucian "golden rule" (don't do to others what you don't want done to you) and the ideas of *zhong* 忠 (loyalty, adherence) and *shu* (taking another's perspective) support the claim that reciprocity is central to Confucian ethics. Kant's Categorical Imperative is briefly mentioned as a contrast with Confucian ethics, and Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on mutual recognition of transcendent freedom from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* also get a hearing. These lead into a comparative analysis of the importance of reciprocity in equalizing sex roles, as well as discussion of socialism, Taiwan's feminist reforms, and strategies to democratize political power.

The chapter "Methodology of the Ethics of Care" aims to reconcile care and justice. It elaborates on Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care*, trying to establish personal relations of care across broader political connections. In answering criticisms of Held's ideas, Yuan returns to the Confucian golden rule and *zhong* and *shu* as foundations for a caring pursuit of justice. She also engages Joan Tronto's *Caring Democracy*, developing this relational basis for selfhood and the fundamental existential equality we all share in needing to be cared for sometimes. This leads to a conception of ethical life as "care with," which is reflected in the Confucian ideal of *ren* as reciprocity in a relational ontology. Connecting *ren* with Tronto's politics of "caring with" is among the more interesting parts of the book, enriching both traditions and pointing toward a hybrid theory of relational ontology that can undergird a new politics.

The third section of the book is titled "Meta-Ethical Matters," but it moves toward applied ethics in the end. It begins with a brief exposition of Hume and Mengzi (a.k.a. Mencius) and their theories of sympathy and empathy, and then addresses feminist responses to their theories. This kind of dialogue about moral epistemology aims to clear out lingering masculinist presuppositions from the inherited theories, while retaining the emphasis on relationships and mutual responsiveness.

The final chapter turns to the practical matter of "China's Population Policy," with a specific focus on the way Chinese society treats elderly women. Seeing this issue as embedded within the problems of economic inequality and environmental exploitation, Yuan calls for both a revival of the Confucian theme of *xiao* (filial

responsibility, family reverence), and for new policies on housing, medical care, pensions, and state support for people's concrete care needs.

Similar themes relating Confucianism to feminism have been explored over the years. Scholars wanting to become familiar with the Confucian intellectual tradition could check out Lisa Rosenlee's *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*. A foundational collection of essays appears in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, edited by Chenyang Li. Ann Pang-White's *Bloomsbury Research Handbook on Chinese Philosophy and Gender* includes essays on Confucianism as well as Daoism and Buddhism. A recent volume, *Feminist Encounters with Confucius*, edited by Mathew Foust and Sor-Hoon Tan, continues these conversations. Foust and Tan's "Introduction" contains footnotes and a bibliography that show the range and depth of literature that has appeared in the past twenty-five years.

Some ways that Yuan extends the research program are through elaborating a Chinese ontology that supports an ethics of care, and in her attention to contemporary policy for elder care in China. The strengths of this book are in its benevolent attitude, its enrichment of our ethical vocabulary through comparative dialogue, and its frequent gems of insight into Confucianism, care ethics, and contemporary society. Its weaknesses are in the clarity, expression, and organization of the text. This is not a textbook or an introduction to Confucianism or to care ethics. It is not a clear or comprehensive guide for those unfamiliar with either tradition. A stronger editorial hand could have smoothed out many of the little wobbles that will slow a reader's uptake of these complex ideas. The scattered exposition of Chinese texts and figures could make it hard for readers coming from a feminist background to follow many of the allusions to and subtleties of the Chinese ethical tradition. For example, unless the reader knows Dong Zhongshu and his relation to the earlier pre-Han dynasty thinkers, it will be hard to make sense of the explanation of his role in enshrining gender hierarchy in *yin-yang* theory:

Several classic readings of *Zhouyi* or *Yijing*, *Li Ji*, and passages of *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Xunzi* must be the sources of early Confucian views of gender, starting with female relating to male but gradually formulating a mainstream Confucian ethics of women's supreme virtue theory, defined in early Han, Dong, and Zhongshu's [sic] cosmology, systematically describing the relationship of both hierarchy and interdependence between *yang* and *yin* and husband and wife; the *yang* or husband is the norm and the lead for the *yin* or wife to follow: "What is constant about the heavens and the earth is that there is a *yin* and then a *yang*. *Yang* is the heavens' virtue and *yin* is the heavens' punishment." (18)

The surrounding discussion doesn't clarify any of that. Yuan often briefly characterizes a complex view, expecting her readers to be aware of the context, then says where it has value and where it goes astray. This approach produces many interesting insights that may speak to readers who follow these traditions and debates, but in some instances it doesn't put enough substance into the exposition or into her interlocutors' positions. An example of this is the treatment of Kant's Categorical Imperative, which is thin and uncharitable. Even though Kant's theories of reciprocity are promised by the chapter title, "Notions of Reciprocity: Kongzi, Kant, Beauvoir, and Critiques of Gender Roles," only four sentences address Kant's ideas, two of which are about lying to a murderer (81) and two about him believing that women are less rational and therefore less moral than men (82). It is not that I wanted or expected more sympathy to Kant in a Confucian-feminist hybrid theory, but this exemplifies a lack of follow-through in presenting ideas and arguments. Another example is the summary of Li Zehou's analysis of the rationalization of early Chinese shamanism: "Briefly speaking, a Shaman was believed to be an ancient mathematician" (15). This is a startling and interesting claim and with elaboration might make a point about ancient magic and numerology, but as it stands it does not provide any of that context and elides a great deal of subtlety and controversy over an obscure topic. Parts of the book lack the patient laying out of ideas that makes a clear and complete case.

Looking past the bumps and gaps in the presentation and arguments, Yuan's efforts advance the broader project of highlighting valuable and effective concepts and attitudes within Confucianism that can support feminist social goals. *Ren* appears to be a good candidate for inclusion in a care ethics framework. Situating *ren* in the relational ontology of heaven, earth, and humanity, and in the reciprocal ethics of *zhong* and *shu*, this book shows where Confucianism can speak the language of feminism, equality, and democracy. It also takes a critical stance in identifying the Confucian concepts and attitudes that stand in the way of gender equality, especially the traditional support of power hierarchies for the sake of social stability. Clearing Confucian theory of this kind of rigid stratification may make it much more applicable to the contemporary egalitarian milieu. This paves the way for actual policies--such as state-sponsored home medical care for elderly women in rural China--that recognize the existential need in every human life to be cared for at times. Yuan's vision of this is an egalitarian *ren* politics of reciprocal caring with each other, which is a contemporary moral ideal rooted in the deep wisdom of traditional values.