

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Discourse on gender oppression marks the modernity of China in the early twentieth century. In the late Qing period, literati belonging to the Reform Movement and to the May Fourth Movement in the era of the early Republic, in particular, capitalized on the inferiority and unspoken misery of Chinese women in history as part of an emerging nationalistic discourse. This was the discourse of the new generation confronted with China's countless defeats and humiliations at the hands of the new imperial power of Japan as well as the West. Victimized, illiterate, rural Chinese women systematically oppressed by the patriarchal family, which was in part supported by the feudal ideology of Confucianism, became the symbol of what was wrong with Old China. China was in desperate need of new value systems to replace the useless ones that were unable to withstand the military force of the West. Although what was needed to replace the old value systems was still uncertain at the time, what needed to be discarded was clear. In the nationalistic discourse of the early Republic, anti-Confucian sentiment ran high. In the political arena, a total purge of Confucianism was completed during the Communist Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s and this purge was viewed as the beginning of New China, the beginning of modernized China and of its entry into the international community of the New World. The May Fourth Movement and Communist China both radically rejected Confucianism, seeing it as the root of China's malaise and inferiority. Their nationalistic discourse, in turn, laid the foundation for the later Western feminists' and Asian specialists' representation of Confucianism as the root of gender oppression in the history of Chinese women.

Beginning in the early 1970s, there was a surge of interest in Chinese gender studies on the part of Western feminists as well as Asian specialists who often frame Chinese women's liberation chronologically in relation to Western intellectual traditions.¹ The surge of feminists' writings and the like on the condition of Chinese women formed part of the grand feminist movement toward constructing a global history of women designed to validate feminists'

defiance of patriarchal social structures as well as the social construction of gender in the West. By going beyond the Western sphere, feminists intended to validate their insistence on the urgency of the problem of gender oppression, while expanding their sphere of concern to include their less fortunate sisters in the third world. The dream of forming a global sisterhood across cultural, geographical, religious, and ethnic boundaries underlies the well-meaning intent of Western feminists in their writings on the condition of third world women. While the concept of “gender” is well articulated and deconstructed in contemporary feminist scholarship, the concept of “culture” remains relatively marginal in cross-cultural studies of the problematic of gender. The lack of attention to the element of “culture” in feminist writings constitutes an obstacle to a genuine understanding of the gender system in an alien culture, where gender is encoded in the context of a whole different set of background assumptions. Indeed, our conceptual framework is that within which the world first becomes intelligible to us, since we only come to comprehend the meaning of the world through participating in a network of shared cultural assumptions of the nature of the world. Hence, in any attempt to understand an alien culture, we must first of all understand the “Otherness” of the other, and the imposition of our own cultural assumptions must be held in check.

In China, the background cultural assumption is by and large informed by Confucianism—the most prominent intellectual tradition in Chinese history. Although it is true that blunt, imperialistic statements degrading Confucianism are no longer discernible in this age of political correctness, the imperialistic sentiment of the superiority of Western ethical theories in regard to the issue of gender parity continues to be assumed in the theoretical background. For the fact that the viability of Confucianism as a *feminist* theory has never been affirmed or suggested by feminists or sinologists, whether they are sympathetic to Confucianism or not, is itself suggestive of the assumed superiority of Western theoretical traditions in relation to gender. Naturally, it begs the question: Why not Confucianism? In this project, I will try to take that first step to provide a conceptual space for scholars to imagine the possibility of Confucian feminism. However, by singling out Confucianism, I am not trying to reduce the richness of Chinese culture to a monolithic intellectual tradition. The intent here is to acknowledge the importance of Confucianism in Chinese self-representation of its intellectual traditions. Confucianism, despite all its ambiguity and complexity in historical reality, has consistently been perceived as the moral backbone and the grand synthesis of Chinese high culture. Without a genuine interest in understanding Confucianism—a complex intellectual tradition—as a source of the background assumptions in the Chinese world, Western feminists in their discourse on gender construction in Chinese society, in effect, essentialize the category of “woman,” making the familiar Western gender paradigm the universal conceptual framework, within which the condition of Chinese women is comprehended and its possible liberation theorized.

If cross-cultural studies are to be genuinely cross-cultural instead of monocultural, with all others subsumed under the Western conceptual framework, the element of “culture”—that is, its background assumptions grounded in its own intellectual traditions—must be granted due respect. For if, as Simone de Beauvoir said, a woman is not born but made, we must first of all understand the symbolic, social meanings that a “Chinese woman” as a gendered as well as a cultural being signifies. If we begin with the premise that each culture is viable, and the social construction of gender in each culture is truly social and cultural, then superimposing a Western conceptual framework onto the alien Other, while at the same time rejecting the intellectual traditions of the Other collectively, is not just inappropriate, it in effect erases the subject matter that it intends to study. And worse yet, it affirms the superiority of Western culture under which all other cultures are supposedly to be conceptually subsumed, despite their localized, empirical differences.

A genuine cross-cultural study must begin with a genuine curiosity for another culture whose “otherness” cannot and should not be reduced to, nor be replaced by, our familiar conceptual schemes. Otherwise, what is made transparent in cross-cultural studies is merely our own reflection in disguise. To use a Kantian term, what is intelligible to us reflects merely the subjective conditions of our being rather than the objective reality of the world itself. In the same way, without a genuine understanding of Chinese culture, the image of victimized Chinese women popular in the West reflects more the assumptions that Western observers have in organizing the world and in making the world of others intelligible to themselves than the reality of the life of Chinese women. If culture is viewed as a substantive term that not only marks an irreducible otherness of the Other but also that permeates the very fabric of everyday life—the way of living, knowing, and being in the world—then every conceptual abstraction of the symbolic meanings of any social and cultural practices must situate them in their proper intellectual traditions. These traditions form the background conceptual scheme of the Other. In Chinese gender studies, a minimal due respect should be paid to Confucianism—the emblem of Chinese high culture.²

In brief, the objective of this project is fourfold: First and foremost, it is to clarify the intellectual tradition of Confucianism—its ambiguous and complex origins, its place in Chinese imperial histories as well as its distinctive ethical theory of *ren* as virtuous personhood. Second, it is to lay out the cultural conceptual schemes in the Chinese world informed by Confucianism; in particular, attention will focus on significant cultural terms such as *yin-yang* and *nei-wai* as well as the unique tradition of women’s biographies in imperial histories and the literary tradition of instruction books written for and *by* women, which are indispensable to the construction of gender in the Chinese world. Third, it is to postulate possible interconnections between the Chinese gender system and Confucianism, where Confucian virtue ethics not only coexists with but also justifies and sustains the patrilineal family structure in Chinese society. Contrary to the conventional assumption about third world

women made in feminist scholarship, in the following, women will not be perceived as mere victims, unequivocally oppressed by men; instead, they are viewed also as participants in sustaining and transmitting sexist practices that conform to certain cultural ideals in Chinese society.³ In other words, women are perceived not just as natural beings but also as cultural beings who, despite the structural limitations imposed on them, also strive to achieve cultural ideals through the means available to them, which are limited in comparison with the cultural resources available to men. Finally, in the conclusion, this book will move beyond a one-sided critique of the sexist components of Confucianism and the deconstruction of the politics of feminism; it will provide 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.

As a preliminary work to the understanding of Chinese gender systems, this project begins with a study of Confucianism. In chapter 2, “Confucianism, Chinese-ness, and *Ren* Virtuous Personhood,” assumptions embodied in early Western feminist writings about the transparency of Confucianism as a collective, sexist ideology frozen in time are set aside. Instead, the meaning of Confucianism is problematized by examining its ambiguous and complex origins as the concept of *Ru* 儒, which denotes the inexact Chinese counterpart of the term *Confucianism* used by Jesuits in the eighteenth century. The prominent status of *Ru* learning in imperial histories contrasts greatly with its semantic ambiguity. The meaning of the character “*ru*” is further obscured when its etymological roots are understood in the tradition of paronomasia. The traditional, paronomastic association between the character “*ru*” 儒 and characters such as “*nou*” 懦, “*rou*” 柔, “*ru*” 孺, “*ru*” 濡, and “*xu*” 需 complicates the task at hand. The ambiguity of its semantic origins in ancient, pre-Confucius times obscures the connection between *Ru* as an intellectual discipline and Confucius, as its most prominent spokesperson. Unlike the term *Confucianism*—its secularized and simplified representation in the West—the complex term *Ru* is neither a unified doctrine nor the exclusive teaching of Confucius. At best, the teaching of *Ru* can only be approximated as the teaching of the sages and the worthies wherein the ethical teaching of Confucius—the Supreme sage and First teacher—forms a part, but an important part nonetheless.

After the problematization of the concept of *Ru*, we venture into *Ru*'s unique place in imperial histories. After the institutionalization of *Ru*'s teachings as the official orthodox teaching in the Former Han of the second century BCE until the end of Qing in the early twentieth century, the learning of *Ru* was, for better or worse, intertwined with the state ideology and politics. With the institutionalization of the Confucian text-based civil service examination system through which state officials were recruited, especially after the reform in the Song dynasty of the eleventh century, *Ru*'s status and the range of knowledge that a learned *Ru* was supposed to have were by and large defined by the state-controlled examination system, in which the hered-

itary emperor acted as the chief examiner. However, it is important to keep it in mind that despite its intimate connection with the state, *Ru* learning was not identical to nor dependent on state power, since as a closer look at the imperial history reveals, *Ru* official-literati did not possess substantial political power, which was in the hands of the hereditary ruling house. Moreover, *Ru*'s self-claimed social role as a mediator between the state and the virtuous *dao* of the sages and the worthies required them to rise above simple loyalty to the state. *Ru*, in other words, was the conscience, the moral backbone of the state, not a mere functionary vessel or clerk of the state bureaucracy. The fluidity of the meaning of *Ru* allows for a wide range of interpretations, and more importantly, the identity of *Ru* is a cultural rather than an ethnic one. The very possibility of Jesuits being able to take on the identity of *Ru* and be accepted into the community of the official-scholars in late-sixteenth-century China is an instance of the fluidity of the meaning of *Ru* and *Ru* learning.

Despite the ambiguity of *Ru* and the indeterminacy of Confucianism, the centrality of the ethical concept of *ren* 仁 in the Confucian tradition is unmistakable. The concept of a relational personhood interlocked with the ethical concept of *ren* in turn lays the foundation for a virtuous personhood achievable through the Confucian project of self-cultivation. Theoretically, the cultural ideal of virtuous personhood acquired through one's mastery of human relations and through embodying specific social virtues appropriate to specific social relations is open to both genders. Yet the openness of Confucian *ren* virtue ethics or relational personhood contrasts greatly with the historical reality of the lives of Chinese women. Such a discrepancy between theory and practice cannot be explained without examining the Chinese gender system in which both man and woman are genderized according to specific cultural assumptions of what constitutes a properly gendered being.

In chapter 3, "Yin-yang, Gender Attributes, and Complementarity", we begin with a critical reexamination of the Western conception of a universal "womanhood" as a kinship neutral category supported by a set of feminine qualities or defined by inborn biological functions. The concept of "woman" designated by the term *funu* 婦女 (*fu*, i.e., married women, and *nu*, i.e., young girls, maids) in the Chinese world is conceived within the bounds of familial relationality through and through. In other words, contrary to the Western representation of "woman" as a natural being existing prior to, and independent of, familial and social relations, a Chinese woman as *funu* is primarily perceived through familial, kinship roles. The concept of male/female whose distinction rests exclusively on biological, sexual differences, in the Confucian tradition, by and large applies to animals, not humans. Gender in the human world signifies strictly social roles and relations. It is through occupying different familial, kinship roles that a "woman" as a gendered being is made. That is to say, the process of ritualization within the kinship system coincides with the process of genderization. The Chinese gender system informed by Confucianism must be understood within the hierarchical structure of the kinship

system, where a socially recognizable “man” or “woman” is made. Consequently, gender distinctions in Chinese society should not be assumed to rely on either a set of innate qualities assigned to the social categories of “man” and “woman,” or the biological categories of “male” and “female.”

In Western feminist discourse on gender, due to the apparent affinity between the *yin-yang* metaphor and the modern duality of femininity and masculinity, the concept of *yin-yang* is seen to be indexical of the Chinese gender system. The receptive quality of the *yin* and the expansive qualities of the *yang* are taken as the theoretical ground for the subordination of Chinese women to the patriarchal family structure. But by taking the *yin-yang* metaphor as conceptually equivalent to the dualistic paradigm of Western femininity and masculinity, one not only imposes a dualistic metaphysics onto the Chinese correlative *yin-yang* cosmology, but more importantly misconstrues the roots of gender oppression in the Chinese world. For unlike the dualistic paradigm of the feminine and the masculine in the West, *yin-yang*—a nonoppositional, complementary binary—cannot even function as an adequate theoretical justification for gender oppression in China. On the contrary, the irreducible complementarity of *yin-yang* both in the cosmos and the human body in fact suggests a rather fluid view of sexual difference between the male and the female body and consequently seems to imply a more tolerant view of gender roles in the Chinese world. But in reality, the fluidity of the *yin-yang* binary contrasts greatly with the rigidity of gender roles in Chinese society.

In chapter 4, “*Nei-Wai*, Gender Distinctions, and Ritual Propriety,” we turn to the spatial binary of *nei-wai* as our point of entry into the Chinese gender system. Like the *yin-yang* metaphor, the term *nei-wai* is often equated with two mutually opposing and conflicting spheres—family and state, or private and public. Consequently the *nei-wai* distinction conventionally seems to signify a strictly physical segregation of man and woman into two different, conflicting spheres. However, this sort of rendering of the *nei-wai* as a static separation of man and woman in the personal, social, and political sphere is inadequate since it has been shown in recent historical studies on gender relations in China that women did, and were socially sanctioned to, traverse the assumed rigid boundary of the *nei* and the *wai*. Furthermore, in the Chinese world, family and state, or private and public, are not two separate realms; instead, the family is the foundation upon which a harmonious state can be built. The “private” virtue of filial piety is the root of all “public” virtues. Hence, just as in the case of the correlative, complementary *yin-yang* binary, the boundary between the *nei* and the *wai* is also a negotiated boundary.

In regard to gender, the *nei-wai* signifies a functional distinction that defines the propriety of two gendered spheres and the normative gender-based division of labor. Although the *nei-wai* boundary is primarily a ritual boundary, its regulative force, where women are formally confined to the familial realm of *nei*, the realm of domestic skills and household management, and

men to the realm of *wai*, the realm of literary learning and public services, is not just theoretical but also reflected in social reality. In other words, due to the *nei-wai* distinction as a functional distinction, a regulative ideal, women of all classes are not allowed legitimate access to the literary realm of *wai*, officialdom, and personal fulfillment. Consequently, talented and learned women confined to the realm of *nei* must conceal their literary talent, since it is inconsequential to their gender identity and roles in the familial realm.

In chapter 5, “Didactic Texts for Women and the Womanly Sphere of *Nei*,” the conflicting nature between women’s gender identity in the realm of *nei* and their literary pursuit in the realm of *wai* along with the unique tradition of virtuous women’s biographies and women’s instruction books written for women and by women is further discussed. The question in regard to female literacy in the Chinese world, unlike in the West, is not so much about whether women should be educated or about women’s innate intellectual capacity, but rather is centered on the propriety of women’s gender identity. Chinese women are typically characterized as submissive, oppressed, and illiterate. The early literary representation of Chinese women found in the *lienu* 列女 tradition where the records of virtuous women’s biographies form part of the dynastic history, however, shows otherwise. There is no shortage of examples in which women are portrayed as virtuous mothers instructing their grown-up sons about state politics and ritual propriety, or courageous maids demolishing their social superiors, or talented women proficient in argumentation. Chinese women in early literary representation are intellectual, virtuous agents going beyond their limited realm of *nei*, the realm of household management and domestic skills.

However, it is true that the wider range of virtues including non-gender-specific virtues such as *biantong* 辯通 (skill in argumentation), *renzhi* 仁智 (benevolent wisdom), and *xianming* 賢明 (sagely intelligence) found in Liu Xiang’s *Lienuzhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Virtuous Women) had been transformed into a narrower range of gender-specific virtues in later dynastic biographies of women and in popular illustrated editions of *Lienuzhuan* especially during the Ming and the Qing periods. The virtues of female chastity and spousal fidelity, in particular, were popularized over nongender-specific virtues in the later literary representation of virtuous women. The shift of the motif in the literary representation of virtuous women might not be a sign of deliberate conservatism on the part of official-literati. Lisa Raphals in her study on the early literary representation of Chinese women proposed that it might simply be facilitated by the emotional appeal and the entertainment value of illustrations with tragic content of a self-sacrificial mother, filial daughter, and chaste wife, in the printing industry.⁴ With the combination of the institutionalization of widowhood in the Yuan dynasty and the political turmoil in the late Ming and early Qing, where wifely fidelity is analogous to man’s political loyalty, those female virtues of chastity and fidelity gradually became the defining female virtues in dynastic biographies of virtuous women as well as popular instruction books.

Despite the growing emphasis on fidelity and chastity, female literacy reached unprecedented heights during the late Ming and early Qing periods. The legitimacy of female authorship and readership in the realm of *nei* was validated not only by the actual high number of published women's writings in the Qing period but also by the compilation of the *Four Books for Women*—*Nujie* 女誡 (The Admonition for Women), *Nulunyu* 女論語 (The Analects for Women), *Neixun* 內訓 (The Regulation for the Inner Quarter), and *Nufan jielu* 女範捷錄 (The Concise Records of Model Women)—that were written for and by women in four different historical times; that is, Ban Zhao of Han, two Song sisters of Tang, Empress Wen of Ming, and the compiler Wang Xiang's widowed mother, woman Liu of Qing. The parity between female authorship in regard to the propriety of *nei* and male authorship in the realm of *wai* is implied in the title of the *Four Books for Women*, which defines the propriety of women just as the Confucian *Four Books* defines the learned status of men. The need for female literacy was first advocated by Ban Zhao—the first and foremost female court historian—despite her deliberately conservative tone in “naturalizing” women's inferiority in the *Nujie*. The incompatibility between virtue and talent in the realm of *nei* made popular by the Ming saying, “A woman without talent is virtuous,” was strongly repudiated by talented and learned women in the late Ming and early Qing periods.

Most noticeably, in the *Nufan jielu*, woman Liu of Qing devoted a whole chapter to repudiating the assumed conflict between talent and virtue. For her, a woman could not be virtuous and ritually proper until she was literate about ancient wisdom preserved in literary forms. Woman Liu appealed to numerous learned and talented women and empresses in history as “historical precedents” for the compatibility between virtue and talent in the womanly realm of *nei*. Although the conservative “female texts and biographies” are a source for reinforcing orthodox values of gender propriety on women who are confined to the realm of *nei*, they are also a source of empowerment where women through the power of literacy become self-affirmative in their historical consciousness.

The question of female literacy and gender propriety occupied the center stage in the Qing literary discourse. The dramatic rise of female literacy and engagement in reading, writing, and publishing has implicitly challenged the orthodox gender propriety in the realm of *nei*, in which the true calling of a virtuous woman primarily rested on her self-sacrifice and fidelity to a patri-lineage rather than on her personal fulfillment and pursuit in the literary realm of *wai*. In this debate we see the conservative reading of the canonical tradition on the one hand, and women's own progressive interpretation and justification for female literacy without overstepping the bounds of ritual propriety, on the other hand. Yet unlike their male counterparts, women with advanced literacy had no legitimate access to the realm of *wai*. For instance, women were not allowed to participate in the civil service examination system, through which their talent could be utilized by the state and hence

justified. Because of a lack of justification, women's advanced literacy was often viewed as a useless social surplus irrelevant to their gender identity. Essentially, possessing literary talent in women is tragic in nature. The paradoxical feeling of learned women toward their own "insignificant" literary skills was a sign of the unspoken conflict between women's gender identity in the realm of the *nei* and their literary pursuit in the realm of *wai*. Although the boundary between the *nei* and the *wai* is ritualistic, it, as a regulative ideal, also deprives women legitimate access to the realm of literary learning and state governance, which are male privileges proper.

The disparity between the realms of *nei* and *wai* marks the beginning of gender disparity between man and woman. It is with this understanding of gender propriety defined along the line of *nei* and *wai* that we turn to concrete social practices in premodern China where severe subjugation of women was often justified and sustained under the banner of gender propriety and Han civility. In chapter 6, "Chinese Sexism and Confucianism," we intend to map out possible interconnections among prevailing social practices such as female infanticide, child-bride/servant, concubinage, widowhood, and footbinding, with Confucianism. Given the complexity and ambiguity of Confucianism or *Ru* stated in chapter 2, how is it possible to identify definitive links between sexist practices and Confucianism as the emblem of Chinese high culture? The roots of women's oppression in premodern China ran deeper than Confucianism as a state ideology. Confucianism's connection with gender oppression, I would propose, should be found in the institution of the family where the Confucian emphasis on the familial virtue of filial piety, the continuity of the family name, and ancestor worship is a way of life, a regulatory ideal that underpins the very concept of civility and hence humanity. In other words, the convergence of these three cultural imperatives—the virtue of filial piety, the continuity of the family name, and ancestor worship—which require male descendants, served as a powerful, cultural basis for gender oppression in premodern China.

Since the male is privileged as the sole bearer of a patrilineage, which in turn is intertwined with the religious practice of ancestor worship and the virtue of filial piety, the importance of the female depends on her success in giving birth to a male heir to carry on the family line. The purely functional role of women in relation to the whole cultural scheme of prioritizing male descendants is especially illuminating in the case of female infanticide and concubinage. In the practice of female infanticide, excess female babies are discarded to reserve family resources for the male heir required for the most important religious ritual of ancestor worship. In the practice of concubinage, the *failure* of the original wife to produce a male heir is compensated by the husband's "right" and obligation to take a concubine to maximize the possibility of producing a male heir. The practice of taking in a child-bride as the future daughter-in-law is one way for a mother to ensure the loyalty of the new bride to the patrilineage of which now the mother is also part. The emphasis on the virtues of filial piety, ancestor worship, and the three-year

mourning ritual is prevalent in Confucian texts such as *Lunyu* (The Analects), *Liji* (Book of Rites), and *Xiaojing* (Book of Filial Piety). In the *Liji*, marriage is stated as having a dual purpose: first, it is to ensure the continuity of the sacrificial ceremony in the ancestral temple and second, the continuation of the family line. In the traditional account, the wife's failure to produce a male heir constitutes one of seven compelling grounds for expelling her from the marriage. Yet without entering into a marriage, a woman is also without a permanent social place of her own. It is not just in the husband's interest, but also in the wife's best interest to ensure that the family would have a male heir through any necessary means including participating in female infanticide, child-bride/servant, and concubinage.

Women's participation in prioritizing the production of a male heir to ensure their place in the patrilineage inevitably reflects the nameless nature of women's personhood. Women's personhood is altogether outside the realm of *wai*—the realm of ethical-political accomplishment and hence the realm of remembrance—wherein one's family name and one's good name are passed and remembered. The *nei-wai* distinction, together with the dual purpose of marriage defined in the *Liji*, renders a woman's presence in the institution of family purely functional and substitutable. She is, in a word, anonymous, bearing no distinct mark of her own person. The nameless aspect of women's personhood is not limited to illiterate, peasant women, since women of all classes are without rank (i.e., without official title in the *wai* independent of the accomplishments of the male members in her family). *Wen* 文 (literary learning) and *zheng* 政 (state governance) are located in the realm of *wai* and therefore are indeed male privileges proper. Women, by contrast, are fundamentally nameless and dependent beings confined to the realm of *nei*, regardless of their actual achievements in literature and state politics. In Rubie S. Watson's words, measured against her male counterpart, a Chinese woman, indeed, cannot be and is not fully personed.⁵ Her familial roles as a wife and mother are purely functionary; she is there to give birth to a male heir in order to fulfill these three cultural imperatives—filial piety, ancestor worship, and the continuation of a patrilineage.

However, these three cultural imperatives could not account for these popular practices of widowhood and footbinding popularized especially during the Ming and the Qing periods. Observing widowhood after the death of one's husband, on the surface, expresses one's fidelity to the husband's lineage. Yet given the priority of having a male heir, it would seem unnecessary for a sonless widow to observe widowhood. In fact, oftentimes a young widow was encouraged by both her natal family as well as in-laws to remarry against her will, since her presence in her late husband's family was now inconsequential. In the same way, the practice of footbinding, which served no formal purpose in perpetuating male descendents, would seem superfluous and accidental. But with a deeper understanding of the encoded social meanings behind these practices, one comes to realize the sort of "social goods" that were presumed to accompany these practices perpetuated across ethnici-

ties, regions, social classes, and historical times. For instance, the practice of voluntary widowhood, protected in imperial statute since the Tang, signified more than spousal fidelity; it signified women's own agency where women's moral intent in safeguarding their integrity as married women must take precedence over parental authority, which emphasized the power of the senior over the junior. The bestowal of imperial honors on the households of chaste widows institutionalized in the Yuan further elevated widowhood from a private virtue to a social virtue with practical consequences. Comparable to the civil service examination for men, widowhood became a means of social mobility for women; that is, a means through which women were able to acquire the highest honor—imperial recognition—because of their own actions instead of the deeds of their father, husband, or son.

In the same way, the practice of footbinding expressed more than the imposition of male sexual desires projected onto the passive female body or the victimization of women by the patriarchal system. It expressed, among other things, women's gender identity, the Han civility, and ethnic identity. It was a proper cultural marking of the female body for the people of Han, especially during the political transition in the late Ming and the early Qing periods, when Han culture was threatened by the invading barbarian, the Manchurian. A pair of bound feet with all its socially sanctioned aesthetic values and class status symbolized the ethnicity of the Han people and their political resistance to the ruling barbaric tribe of the Manchu, which repeatedly issued prohibitions on the practice of footbinding among the Han people. What is more, footbinding was also women's culture proper where women bound their own feet, and the feet of their daughters who in turn transmitted "this cultural of ours" in the inner quarters through wraps and needles instead of words and brushes. The aim of this chapter is not to somehow explain away the "sexist" components of these social practices. After all, most of these practices mentioned no longer exist as social ideals. Rather, the purpose here is to decode cultural meanings embodied in social practices so that we are able to come to see women as subjects, and to understand women's own agency in not only embracing but also actively participating in those practices in order to achieve some sort of shared cultural ideals given the structural limitations imposed on them. For without such an understanding, women in third world countries remain frozen in time as mere passive victims of their "sexist" traditions whose liberation can only be justified by Western ethical theories that supposedly rise above parochial, "cultural" moralities.

In order to go beyond the false dichotomy between the West as a moral agent and the rest of the world as a moral problem waiting to be solved, in the conclusion, we will contemplate the viability of Confucianism as a feminist ethical theory. In chapter 7, "Toward a Confucian Feminism—Feminist Ethics In-the-Making," we will seek the resources available within the Confucian tradition that could be used as the building block of a distinct Confucian feminist ethic that is practical in the sense that it takes concrete human relations as its starting point and yet is comprehensive in scope without a meta-

physical grounding. It would have no need to presuppose an “original” principle underlying all other ethical principles, nor would it presuppose an absolute equality for all without qualification. First of all, our postulated Confucian feminism will affirm a relational self situated in a web of relations that are not just “add-ons” to the “core” self, but are coextensive with the substantial self. A person as a person is always a person-in-relations. The Confucian virtue of filial piety, where reciprocal care between parent and child is required, is our starting point of being human. The parent-child relationship wherein one first finds oneself in the world would be prioritized. The virtue of filial piety—one’s genuine care for others—is not just limited to one’s private household, since it has traditionally been extended to reach well beyond the immediate family.

Second, our Confucian feminism will affirm the centrality of the virtue of *ren* as the culmination of ideal, achieved personhood. The virtue of *ren* begins with the virtue of filial piety and is comprehensive in its scope, since a person of *ren* is also a person of *yi* 義 (appropriateness), of *li* 禮 (ritual), of *zhi* 智 (wisdom), of *shu* 恕 (reciprocity), of *xin* 信 (trustworthiness), etc. This is so because to be *ren* is also to be a person who embodies specific social excellences appropriate to specific social relations wherein the person is situated. And since there is no metaphysical ground upon which one is a person without qualification, the self will necessarily, as it were, extend itself outward beyond the familial realm, or at least maintain existing familial relationships. As the web of relationships is extended from the family to the world at large, the range of social excellences required is widened as well. Although the virtue of *ren* is comprehensive in its scope, it can only be actualized in each particular relationship governed by particular social excellence appropriate to that relationship. In sum, the virtue of *ren* is a practical ethic taking human relations as its priority without a metaphysical grounding.

Lastly, our Confucian feminism will affirm the complementarity, and the reciprocity, of *nei-wai* and *yin-yang* as the basic structure of human relations. In addition, it will also assert the basic hierarchal scheme of human relations in which inequality based on ability or moral authority, rather than an absolute equality, is the starting point among particulars. We will modify the hierarchal relationship between husband and wife and the gender-based division of labor based on the *nei-wai* distinction to meet the challenges of feminism.⁶ We will discard the minister-wife and ruler-husband analogy and replace it with friendship, which is available within the Confucian five social relations. Although, like all other relationships in Confucianism, relationship between friends is also hierarchal, the hierarchy is not necessarily gender-based and the association between friends is strictly voluntary. The duration of that association also depends on an assumed common goal among its participants. Such a rectification in the context of the husband-wife relation would enable women to achieve in the realm of *wai* and be able to achieve the Confucian ideal of *junzi*—a consummated, moral subject—not only in the immediate realm of familial relations but also in the world at large.

Certainly, this book is by and large an experiment, an initial attempt to reconcile Confucianism and feminism and to go beyond a mere critique of the “sexist” nature of Confucianism and the implicit “neocolonial” assumptions in Western feminism. One way to go beyond a merely negative deconstruction of existing theories is to positively conceive the possibility of a hybrid ethical theory—Confucian feminism—where Confucian ethics with modification is also a source for women’s liberation. The viability of Confucianism to rectify itself and to meet the challenges of feminism must first of all be assumed and be conceived to be a real possibility before this whole project can be even carried out. The degree of success or failure of this project is open to assessment. But what is clear is that the possibility of such a convergence between Confucianism and feminism will not only bring Confucianism forward into the twenty-first century where the issue of gender can no longer be ignored in the discourse on ethics, but also will open up the theoretical horizons of feminism where the possibility of women’s liberation is no longer limited to Western theoretical paradigms.