INTRODUCTION: FEMINISM AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

At the Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy conference held at the University of New South Wales, Australia, in October 1998, Professor Chung-ying Cheng discussed with me the idea of an issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* dedicated to the topic of feminism and Chinese philosophy. In particular, he noted the timeliness of the theme given the status and significance of feminist philosophical inquiry in the contemporary context. Professor Cheng kindly extended to me an invitation to be the guest editor of this issue, an invitation that I was honored to accept.

Reflecting on the timeliness of this issue, it is quite obvious that movements and trends toward globalization have meant, for many, a newfound awareness of democracy as an ideal and of human rights as a fundamental moral concept. In this context of global dialogue and interchange, many observers of East Asian communities have commented on existing patriarchal structures and practices in these communities. In addition, it has been suggested that the roots of structures and practices that subjugate women may be located in the philosophical traditions of East Asia.

In this regard, it is the Confucian tradition that has most often been accused of antifeminist views. Although it may be reasonable to suggest that both Daoism and East Asian Buddhism embody antifeminist elements given that the two traditions had arisen and evolved within cultures that are essentially patriarchal, it has often been argued that the subjugation of women is particularly pronounced in Confucian philosophy. There is in general a more “forgiving” attitude toward Daoism because Daoist philosophy is seen to reject existing norms and practices; this includes a rejection of characteristics commonly associated with masculinity, while upholding some other traits normally associated with femininity. In the case of Buddhism, it appears that there is a tendency to focus on more abstract issues such as the concept of mind. Such discussions in Buddhist philosophy seem to transcend stereotypical characterisations of masculinity and femininity. In comparison, the most notable criticism of Confucian thought is that it does not provide avenues for women to achieve excellence beyond the domestic context.

With these points in mind, I invited Chenyang Li (Central Washing-

ton University), Eva Man (Hong Kong Baptist University), and Sandra Wawrytko (San Diego State University) to submit papers for this issue. These philosophers have published on the topic of feminist philosophy and Chinese thought. Professor Cheng subsequently invited two other scholars, Linyu Gu (Gakushuin University, Tokyo) and Julia Tao (City University, Hong Kong), to contribute articles to this issue as well.

Together, the articles in this issue cover a range of important questions arising from feminist concerns. A number of the contributors defend some aspects of Chinese philosophy, arguing that these ideas have been misinterpreted or misrepresented. A different, though not incompatible approach, involves the suggestion that Chinese thought may be adapted in an attempt to address feminist concerns. Some others make a bolder move in isolating certain features in particular traditions, arguing that these features may be fruitfully applied to contemporary discussions in the area of feminist thought.

In “The *Daodejing*: Resources for Contemporary Feminist Thinking,” I investigate the notion of femininity in the *Daodejing* and argue that the concept should be approached with caution because it aligns femininity with the soft, weak, and nonassertive. I then proceed to demonstrate that the interdependence between *dao* and *de* in the *Daodejing* provides an interesting and useful schema according to which the concepts femininity and masculinity may be understood as interdependent. I suggest that this conceptual schema, when applied to the conception of femininity and masculinity, is effective in shattering a dichotomous view or a stereotypical construction of the two concepts.

An issue associated with the dichotomous view of femininity and masculinity is that of mind–body dualism. The idea of mind–body dualism has been viewed with suspicion because it is questionable if the human mind and the body do indeed work according to a dichotomous framework. Feminist concerns about this dichotomy extend even further, because it spawns another set of dichotomies: the rational mind is associated with masculinity (in contrast to emotion-driven females) and the body that is described is a male body (thus defining the female body out of existence). Eva Man presents an overview of contemporary feminist concerns about representations of the body. In her article “Contemporary Feminist Body Theories and Mencius’s Ideas of Body and Mind,” Professor Man upholds Baruch Spinoza’s antimechanistic anti-essentialist view of human existence. She also investigates Mencius’s theory of mind and bodily functions, and the *Yijing* principle of *yinyang*. Integrating elements of Mencian philosophy and the holistic perspective provided by the principle of *yinyang*, the author argues for a holistic and harmonious conceptualization of the body and mind which will prompt a radical rethinking of the concept of human personhood.

Sandra Wawrytko discusses the lives of Chinese women, contemplating whether Confucian philosophy allows for avenues for self-cultivation for women beyond the merely domestic domain. In her article provocatively entitled “Kongzi as Feminist: Confucian Self-Cultivation in a Contemporary Context,” Professor Wawrytko attempts a creative, hermeneutic use of Confucian reasoning devices and passages from the *Lunyu* to revitalize Confucian thought. She points out that the situation of women as a repressed and suppressed group within Chinese society might be blamed on neo-Confucianism, under social and political conditions that produced a dominant conservative outlook. From the point of view of the *Lunyu*, however, she argues that the theory of self-cultivation and its underlying theme of meritocracy are supportive of feminist objectives. Furthermore, she also emphasizes that the *junzi* ideal embodies gender infusion, whereby a conflict-resolution approach to problems and issues is valued over macho displays.

Also on the topic of Confucian philosophy and its attitude toward women, the next article, “Confucianism and Feminist Concerns: Overcoming the Confucian ‘Gender Complex,’” provides a survey of historical and philosophical literature. Drawing on the available literature, Chenyang Li challenges some familiar, simplistic images of Chinese women as oppressed and totally helpless. However, Professor Li is quick to point out that there are structural limitations within Confucian thought that place constraints on women’s well-being; these need to be addressed. The article concludes with a practical consideration of what might be done to deal with the limitations of Confucian philosophy. Professor Li suggests a range of ways of looking at the issue, as other scholars have attempted. He optimistically notes that such projects are not backward-looking attempts to justify Confucianism, but rather are forward-looking, for they seek to adapt Confucian philosophy in light of contemporary norms and values.

One way to deal with the inadequacies of traditional philosophies with regard to women’s welfare is to discard the offending philosophical system. This may be unwise. Indeed, perhaps one should not be too hasty in rejecting traditional philosophies simply because they do not seem compatible with some contemporary values. Linyu Gu challenges a criticism of the concept of “self-emptying” in Japanese Buddhism. In “Process and *Shin No Jiko* (‘True Self’): A Critique of Feminist Interpretation of ‘Self-Emptying,’” Professor Gu rejects the analysis of the concept as promoting self-sacrifice, self-denial, and selflessness, which are in turn seen to prevent women’s development. In comparing the concept of self-emptying with A. N. Whitehead’s idea of self-perishing and Nishida’s concept of transcending experience, Professor Gu asserts that Buddhist self-emptying is indeed true self-affirmation, and that the

call for self-emptying applies both to men and women. In more general terms, Professor Gu also warns against the oversimplification and misunderstanding of Buddhist terms that can result from conceptualizing Asian views of salvation within a Western philosophical framework.

The final article, “Two Perspectives of Care: Confucian *Ren* and Feminist Care,” applies an analytical approach to the Confucian *ren* and feminist care ethic. Julia Tao is careful to discuss important differences in the two systems, including motivation, the scope of application, and the limits of responsibilities. The article is not a mere comparative essay; Professor Tao suggests a number of ways the Confucian *ren* ethic provides certain deep insights into moral thinking. The most striking of these suggestions is the point that Confucian *ren* ethics break the implied assumption that care is feminine, and hence breaks the dichotomy between justice and care as two incompatible or antithetical systems.

The dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy will continue to evolve as societies, cultures, and norms develop. Furthermore, such dialogues will be enriched by the sharing of perspectives, made possible through globalization. Both East and West will reap the benefits of honest and mature dialogue. The articles in this issue establish the capacity of East Asian philosophies to recognize and adapt to the emergent and important issue of women’s welfare. More importantly, however, there is an implicit endorsement of the idea that these traditional philosophies are valued because their insights are still relevant in our contemporary context. The question raised at the beginning of this introduction—that Chinese philosophy needs critically to reflect on its views regarding the status and value of women—assumed that Western philosophy has something valuable to offer in this regard. A theme that appears in most of the essays in this issue turns the tables: East Asian philosophy upholds a holistic, nondualist conception of personhood, and a non-dichotomous view of femininity and masculinity. These notions will enrich discussions in Western philosophy, which now finds Platonic and Cartesian conceptions of personhood unacceptable. Indeed, in many areas in Western philosophy, scholars are looking to traditional Eastern philosophies because the latter hold valuable insights into conceptions of interdependence, harmony, and holism.

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