Reviews


This is the first book-length study in English of gender issues in the *Mencius*. The author’s thesis is clearly stated at the beginning of Chapter 8: “My claim is that Mencius advocates a certain masculine ideal, embodied in the true king, and that this ideal form of masculinity incorporates gender traits widely accepted as female” (p. 111). There are two possible interpretations of this claim. Are the characteristics of Mencius’s ideal masculinity ones that are widely accepted today as female, or ones that would have been widely accepted *in Mencius’s own time* as female? The difference is crucial.

The thesis that Confucian philosophers, including Mencius, made arguments compatible with contemporary feminist ethics has been made before, notably by Chenyang Li.¹ Li has had both supporters and critics,² but the general argument is illuminating as long as it is not misread as saying that Confucianism is identical to care ethics or that Confucians were feminists *avant la lettre*. The Confucian characteristic of grounding ethics in personal relationships—rather than, say, codifiable rules of conduct—was not followed by the mainstream of Western ethics, and precisely this neglect of alternative approaches has given rise to feminist critiques since World War II. Thus it is not farfetched to identify certain commonalities between Confucian and feminist philosophy.

² See Ranjoo Seodu Herr, “Is Confucianism Compatible with Care Ethics? A Critique,” *Philosophy East and West* 53.4 (2003): 471-89; Julia Tao Lai Po-wah, “Two Perspectives of Care: Confucian Ren and Feminist Care,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27.2 (2000):215-40; and Joel J. Kupperman, “Feminism as Radical Confucianism: Self and Tradition,” in Li, *The Sage and the Second Sex*, 43-56. Many of Li’s critics conflate Confucianism and patriarchy by identifying all patriarchal structures and conventions in China with Confucianism. For example, see Herr, 471: “Confucianism, as the dominant ideology of East Asia for over two millennia, has played a central role in subjugating women under one of the most systemic and prolonged patriarchies in human history.”
Joanne D. Birdwhistell, however, takes the case one step further and argues that Mencius’s ideal form of masculinity incorporates gender traits that his own audience would have considered feminine. This is a much more difficult claim to support, and in the end her book is unconvincing. Her argument relies on unsubstantiated associations of certain characteristics with masculinity and femininity; on the fallacy of persuasive definition; and, I believe, on a conflation of ancient Chinese conceptions of appropriate female roles with those of our own society in the twenty-first century.

Birdwhistell devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 4, pp. 51-61) to “King Hui’s self-centered masculinity,” and Mencius’s objections to it. Few readers of the Mencius would disagree that the figure of King Hui of Liang displays gross self-centeredness in the text, and that Mencius excoriates it in memorable passages (Book 1A). But I still fail to see, even after reading this chapter twice, what King Hui’s self-centeredness has to do with his masculinity. Mencius does not accuse King Hui of being too masculine; he accuses him of being unaware of his subjects’ needs and his obligation to provide for them. This is especially confusing inasmuch as misogynistic criticisms of women in antiquity tended to emphasize their alleged self-centeredness. They care nothing for their in-laws, for the state, and so on; they think only of their own material advancement (and perhaps that of their sons, whom they wish to plant in the main lines of succession). It seems very unlikely that ordinary Warring States readers would have regarded self-centeredness as a peculiarly masculine trait.

No more persuasively, the author associates certain laudable characteristics, especially pertaining to virtue and forbearance, with femininity. Consider the following:

As father and mother of the people, the transformed ruler is encouraged to love and protect the people, and to employ and extend kindness. Like a mother, he is called on to be virtuous, and like a wife he is urged to be respectful, thrifty, courteous, and humble (3A.3). Xianmu 賢母 (wise and virtuous mother) was a standard term for respected mothers throughout most of Chinese history. (p. 90).

Mencius 3A.3 does not state or even imply that virtue is particular to mothers or that respectfulness, thrift, courtesy, and humility are particular to wives—let alone that the ruler is encouraged to cultivate these traits because he needs to get in touch with his feminine side. (It seems almost as though Birdwhistell is reading a different text; the term xianmu is in fact nowhere found in the Mencius.) To be sure, referring to the king as min fumu 民父母 (father and mother of the people), as the Mencius does on three occasions (1A.4, 1B.7, and 3A.3), is an indication

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3) See, for example, the harangue by Fu Chen 富辰 on the insatiable greed of barbarians and women in Yang Bojun 杨伯峻, Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu 春秋左傳注, second edition (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), I, 425 (Xi 僭 24=636 B.C.).