

Confucian Family for a Feminist Future¹

Abstract

The Confucian family, not only in its historical manifestations but also in the imagination of the Confucian founders, was the locus of misogynist norms and practices that have subjugated women in varying degrees. Therefore, advancing women's well-being and equality in East Asia may seem to require radically transforming the Confucian family to approximate alternative ideal conceptions of the family in the West. This article opposes such a stance by arguing that (1) Western conceptions of the family may be neither plausible nor feasible in traditionally Confucian societies and (2) the Confucian family, once reconstructed in line with Confucianism's core ideas and values, can be conducive to a feminist future in East Asia that is uniquely Confucian. In order to support my position, not only influential contemporary Western ideal conceptions of the family from the justice perspective and care ethics, but also different interpretations of the Confucian family will be carefully examined.

East Asian societies have gone through dramatic changes socially, politically and economically under Western influences since the turn of the last century. While Confucian values are still pervasive in daily practices of much of East Asia, Confucianism has lost its lofty status as the official ideology of formerly Confucian East Asia. Under such circumstances, feminists might rightfully wonder about the status of the Confucian family. Although Confucius and Mencius have characterized the Confucian family as the very basis of *ren*, the most important Confucian virtue (*Mencius* 4A.27; cf. 1A.1, 6B.3, 7A.15; *Analects* 1.2, 2.5), the historical manifestations of the Confucian family have been detrimental to women's well-being and equality. Since a smorgasbord of Western philosophical perspectives on family is available as options for East Asians to adopt and apply as they restructure their societies in the contemporary world, some East Asian feminists might conclude that advancing women's well-being and equality in East Asia requires radically transforming the Confucian family to approximate some other form of the family provided by Western alternatives.

This article contends that such a stance may not only be premature but also misguided. First, it may be premature, as historical manifestations of the Confucian family may have resulted from a distorted application of core Confucian ideas and values. A more consistent application of core Confucian ideas and values to the concept of family may render pleasantly surprising results for feminists, as I will argue. Second, it may be misguided, because Western ideal conceptions of the family may be neither feasible nor plausible in the East Asian context:

Some may not be feasible due to cultural incompatibility, some may be predicated on problematic theoretical assumptions, or both. To support my position, I carefully examine both historical manifestations of the Confucian family and the way Confucius and Mencius envisioned it, both of which are patriarchal, though to different degrees. Then I consider two influential contemporary Western ideal conceptions of the family. One conception is from the so called justice perspective reconstructed along the lines suggested by John Rawls and Susan Okin. The other conception is from care ethics, which has emerged as a counterpoint to the justice perspective. At least one Confucian scholar has argued that the latter conception may be conducive to a “new form of Confucianism” that is also feminist (Li 1994, 86). In the next section, I argue that these two Western alternatives are not readily feasible in the East Asian context as some seem to think. I conclude that the Confucian family, once reconstructed in line with Confucianism’s core ideas and values, can be conducive to a feminist future in East Asia that is uniquely Confucian.

I. The Confucian Family in Theory and Practice

How did Confucius and Mencius conceptualize the Confucian family? The Confucian family consists of two axes, the relation between “father and son”—or, more broadly, parent and child—and the relation between husband and wife, which are two among the “five human relations (*wulun* 五倫)” (*Mencius* 3A.4) crucial to Confucianism.² The relation between parent and child is of particular importance to Confucianism, since it is considered “the root of *ren* (humanheartedness 仁)” (*Analects* 1.2), the primary Confucian virtue. In Confucianism, however, *ren* is inextricably connected to another Confucian virtue, *li* (propriety 禮),³ which refers to intersubjective “norms and standards of proper behavior” (Tu 1979a, p.6) that accord with public expectations pertaining to each role in human relations. According to Mencius, the proper *li* for the “father and son” relation is “affection (*qin* 親)” and the *li* for the husband and wife relation is “distinction (*pie* 別)” (*Mencius* 3A.4).

The Confucian emphasis on the parent-child relation is well placed, as it is, both symbolically as well as practically, “the natural home for nourishing the self and, specifically, for helping the self to establish fruitful dyadic relationships” (Tu 1986, 183). As the most essential Confucian human relation, the obligation to maintain the parent-child relation

according to its *li* of affection is very strict in Confucianism (see, *Analects* 17:21; *Mencius* 7B:24). The family is the fundamental well-spring of love and therefore provides an opportunity to practice love. Therefore, “the great exercise of [love] is in showing affection for relatives” (*Zhongyong* 20). The idea that the parent-child relation is the spring of deepest and strongest love, from which love for others is derived, is aptly reflected in the translation of Mencian *ren* as “love with distinction” (*chadengai* 差等愛, W.Chan 1955).

What did Confucius and Mencius think was implied by the *li* of affection in the parent-child relation? Interestingly, the Confucian canons focus almost exclusively on the responsibility of children to express the proper *li* of affection toward parents. The filial child must do the following to express the *li* of affection toward parents: “When parents are alive one should serve them according to *li*; when they die, one should bury them according to *li*, and honor them according to *li*” (*Analects* 2.5). Children must show absolute devotion and “Never disobey” their parents (*Analects* 2.5; see also, 1:7, 13.18; *Mencius* 4A.28, 4B.30). Even when parents have committed immoral acts, children should exemplify unconditional filial piety by “conceal[ing] the misconduct” of parents (*Analects* 13.18). This does not necessarily mean that Confucius endorsed unprincipled moral relativism, for when parents act against *li*, children may “remonstrate” (*jian* 諫), albeit “gently” (*yinwei* 隱微) (*Xiao jing* 孝經13). When parents are not inclined to listen, however, children should not complain but “resume an attitude of reverence and not abandon their effort to serve them” (*Analects* 4.18). Even if parents do not mend their ways despite the children’s efforts, children must never overstep what is prescribed by their filial duty while trying to lead parents in the right direction as best as they can.

What about the other axis of the Confucian family, the husband-wife relation? The significance of the husband-wife relation is inextricably connected to the importance of the parent-child relation in Confucianism. In order for the relation between parent and child to be possible, there must first be a heterosexual couple—husband and wife—to form a union in which children would be born. Indeed, getting married and having an heir is considered the most important filial duty in Confucianism (*Mencius* 4A:26). In the Mencian context, distinction (*pie*, 別), the proper *li* of the husband-wife relation, refers to the separation of inner and outer (*nei-wai* 內外) spheres “based on functions” (S.Chan 150). Accordingly, adherence to *pie* implies that men who occupy the public world ought to focus on affairs pertaining to the

outside and women who occupy the private/domestic world ought to focus on affairs pertaining to the household. **The emerging structure of the Confucian family from this analysis consists of two heterosexual spouses occupying distinct realms—public and domestic—according to their functions and their children who are filial to parents.** This is a pervasive ideal of the family in East Asia even today. This conception of the family, however, is patriarchal from the feminist point of view, unduly restrictive of career and life opportunities for women. Still, the patriarchal nature of this original conception of the Confucian family pales in comparison to what came after.

After Confucianism has been adopted as the state ideology by numerous East Asian dynasties centuries after Confucius's death, the Confucian family became virulently patriarchal. One pivotal moment for this transformation came when the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒 179-104 BC), influenced by the *Book of Changes*, made a fateful connection between sex differences and the *ying-yang* (陰陽) principle (S.Chan 2008, 147). Consequently, *pie*, the *li* of the husband-wife relation, was interpreted in later Confucian dynasties as implying a metaphysical difference between the sexes that renders women's status inferior to men's in accordance with the cosmological order in which "heaven (*yang*) dominates earth (*yin*)."³ Hence this rationalized women's confinement to the "inner" (*nei* 內) or domestic sphere, strictly segregated from and completely subordinated to the "outer" (*wai* 外) public sphere of men. As ontologically inferior inhabitants of the subordinate sphere, women's sole virtue was "submissiveness" (*shun* 順) (231; see also, *Mencius* 3B:2; S.Chan 2008, 156) and their primary obligation was "obey[ing] [their] superiors" who are male (231).

An extreme form of patriarchal Confucian family that resulted from the application of this later Confucian interpretation of *pie* can be found in the Chosôn Dynasty (朝鮮 1392-1910) on the Korean peninsula, which was established on explicitly Confucian values.⁴ Chosôn Confucians who were faced with the urgent task of organizing a new society according to Confucian values and principles wholeheartedly adopted the Confucian vision offered by the neo-Confucian Zhuxi (朱熹, 1130–1200), who was a preeminent Confucian scholar of the Song Dynasty (宋 960-1279). In addition to his influential interpretations of the Confucian classical texts, Zhuxi wrote various handbooks with concrete and specific guidelines to

elaborate on the *li* of family relations.⁵ The Chosôn Confucians took Zhuxi's handbooks of *li* as the defining guide for state-building (Deuchler 1992, 112).⁶

The most significant element in Zhuxi's handbooks of *li* regulating family relations is the "agnatic principle (*jong-beop/zongfa* 宗法)," which takes patrilineal descent groups as basic units of society. Strict adherence to the agnatic principle would result in "a kinship system that rested on highly structured patrilineal descent groups. These patrilineages comprised groups of agnates who derived their common descent from a real or putative apical ancestor (*si-jo* 始祖) and identified themselves with a common surname (*seong* 姓) and a common ancestral seat (*bon-gwan* 本館)" (6). The Confucian family for neo-Confucians, then, is the patrilineal descent group, and maintaining the well-being of the family is maintaining a clear line of descent in such a group. Elaborate rituals of ancestor worship, mourning, and funerals became vehicles through which the patrilineal social structure was implemented, as performing such rituals necessitated the specification and clarification of the descent line.

Neo-Confucians worried that without a clear principle defining the line of descent a descent group might disintegrate "at the death of the lineal heir" (130). The obsession with clarifying the descent line that "would provide the criteria on the basis of which descent group membership and thus social status could be verified," however, clashed with the legally sanctioned custom of "polygyny,"⁷ which allowed men, especially of the upper class, to have multiple wives.⁸ This generated a sticky problem: How to prioritize the line of descent among multiple sons from multiple wives? Their solution was to "single out one wife and her children as a man's rightful spouse and legitimate heirs" (232). With this aim, it was legally decided in 1413 that a man must have only one legal wife, who is the primary wife (*cheo* 妻) and all other wives were relegated to the status of secondary or minor wives (*cheop* 妾). In this, Chosôn Confucians followed the "rule of primogeniture operative in China's feudal past," according to which "only the eldest son by the primary wife could succeed his father" (132).

Due to the strict distinction between primary and secondary wives, "Lineages (and families)" were clearly demarcated between "main lines" formed by the firstborn sons of primary wives, "branch lines" formed by younger sons by the same mother. Sons of minor wives, however, were of secondary status; they were, for all intents and purposes, "not full-fledged lineal members" (7). The distinction between primary and secondary wives functioned

to divide the society into “the superior and inferior” and ensured that the power would be confined to a small number of the privileged (232). For the ruling class of Chosôn, “limiting access to the ranks of the elite” (119) by excluding sons born to secondary wives maintained the political privilege of the elite by restricting political participation of the “inferior.” “Descent and political participation therefore came to be inextricably intertwined” (119-120) through the agnatic principle bolstered by the distinction between primary and secondary wives.

In a social system that was structured to organize patrilineal descent groups according to the agnatic principle, the *li* of the husband-wife relation, *pie* (別), now fortified by *ying-yang* metaphysics, was taken as a strict physical segregation of the sexes predicated on the inexorable subordination of women to men. A woman’s only role was to “bring forth male offspring” in an arranged marriage (237, 240) so that the husband’s surname and blood line would perpetuate into the indefinite future. Women had no identity other than this primary role⁹: From childhood, they were indoctrinated to fulfill this role with complete submission and physically confined to the “inner” sphere to focus solely on their domestic function (see 257-63).¹⁰ Women who were unable or unwilling to fulfill this role with submissiveness were often severely penalized, both socially and legally, and shunted aside as non-entities.¹¹ The legal distinction between primary and secondary wives in a social milieu that sanctioned polygyny pitted even women who were fulfilling their function of giving birth to sons against one another as competitors. Regarding secondary wives, in particular, not only did their well-being and survival depend on the husband’s whimsical favors, but their sons were destined to become secondary citizens (269-72).

II. Western Alternative Conceptions of Family

The patriarchal manifestations of the Confucian family whether in theory or practice have left many feminists in East Asia disillusioned about their Confucian tradition; many have been compelled to look elsewhere for ideal forms of the family for reforming their societies. In recent decades, two Western models have captured feminist imagination in East Asia:

- 1) The ideal family from the justice perspective

One such conception has been proposed by a prominent liberal feminist, Susan Okin, who applies John Rawls's theory of justice to the issues of gender and family (1989). To understand Okin's proposal, let us briefly examine Rawls's theory of justice.¹² According to Rawls, the only principles of justice that would be legitimate are those agreed to by everyone who would be affected by them "in an initial situation that is fair" in which everyone is genuinely equal (TJ, 45). Since such a fair initial situation does not exist in the real world, Rawls proposes that we engage in a hypothetical thought experiment. Human agents can best realize their nature as "free," "equal," and "rational" beings in the "Original Position" (TJ, 515). In this hypothetical situation, agents are situated behind the "veil of ignorance" so that they are freed from the effects of "natural contingencies and social accidents" (252), such as their social, economic, political, and psychological status (137). In other words, they exist in the Original Position as transparent "moral agents" divested of all concrete and particular aspects of themselves, aware only of those characteristics they share in common with all others. Characteristics shared by all moral agents include having a conception of the good, although they know not which, and having a sense of justice (12). They are also endowed with a common psychological trait of "mutual disinterestedness" in being primarily concerned with their own interests (13).

Despite Rawls's recognition that the family *is* part of "the primary subject of justice" (TJ, p.7; see also, 462-63), Okin deplores his "neglect of gender (89)" in his *A Theory of Justice* (TJ). In particular, Okin criticizes Rawls for having assumed that "those in the Original Position are the heads or representatives of families" who "are not in a position to determine questions of justice within families" (94). Okin argues that Rawls's failure to subject the structure of the family to his principles of justice is "particularly serious" because Rawls believes that a theory of justice must take account of "how [individuals] get to be what they are" rather than taking "their final aims and interests, their attitudes to themselves and their life, as given" (97). Vulnerabilities that are "created, shaped, or sustained by current social arrangements" (Goodin, p.xi, as quoted in Okin, 136) indicate how unjust such social arrangements are. Western institutions of marriage and family as they currently exist are "unjust institutions" (135), as they "constitute the pivot of a societal system of gender that renders women [asymmetrically] vulnerable to dependency, exploitation, and abuse" (136) whether in the anticipation of, during, or in the dissolution of marriage.

Still, Okin recognizes the feminist potential of Rawls's theory in that "a consistent and wholehearted application of Rawls's liberal principles of justice can lead us to challenge fundamentally the gender system of our society" (89). In order to find out the contours of just institutions of marriage and family, therefore, Okin proposes that Rawls's thought experiment in the Original Position include the gender of the participants among irrelevant contingencies that ought to be placed behind the veil of ignorance. Elements of just institutions of marriage and family would be those on which persons in the Rawlsian Original Position would agree, ignorant of any of their particular attributes, including sex (174). Under such circumstances, persons would lack knowledge of their current beliefs about the characteristics of men and women and their related convictions about the appropriate division of labor between the sexes. In other words, they lack any notion of gender, by which Okin means "the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference" (6).

The kinds of social structures and public policies regarding relations between the sexes, and the family in particular, that would be agreed upon in the Original Position would be "a basic model that would absolutely minimize gender" (175). Equal sharing of parental responsibility for child care, both paid and unpaid, will become the norm, both within the household and in public, as parties to the Original Position will recognize that the currently unpaid labor within the household is just as important as the paid labor and that the homemaking and child-rearing spouse has an equal status as the wage-earning spouse (181). Both spouses would have "*equal legal entitlement* to all earnings coming into the household (180-81)" and "the division of labor between the sexes to involve the economic dependence" (180) would become unnecessary.

Public policies and laws should not only assume but also facilitate equal legal entitlement. "Special protections" for those who choose to engage in "the division of labor between the sexes" must be built into laws and public policies, so that it "does not result in injustice" (172). This will require radical changes, especially regarding child-rearing. Substantial changes should be made in the work life of workers of either sex throughout the period in which they are parents of small children, such as guaranteed parental leave during the postbirth months for both mothers and fathers on same terms, rights to seniority, benefits, etc., "without prejudice to their jobs." Also workers should be entitled to work "less than full-time" while their children are very young, and to work "flexible or somewhat reduced hours" at least until their children reach the school age (176). The provision of "high-quality on-site day care for children from infancy up to school

age” should be required of “Large-scale employers” (176-7). In case the employer is exempt from providing such care, then the government should also subsidize “equal quality day care for all young children (177).” When a separation or divorce occurs, which invariably leaves the wife “asymmetrically vulnerable due to her complete or partial loss of the capacity to be economically self-supporting” throughout marriage (183), the laws should require the parent without physical custody to provide the child’s support “*to the point where the standards of living of the two households were the same*” (179, original emphases).

2) The ideal family in care ethics

While Okin’s proposal to revise Rawls’s theory of justice to promote justice in the family may appeal to liberal feminists, many other Western feminists have expressed dissatisfaction with such a position. Care ethicists in particular have launched a powerful criticism of Rawls’s liberal position, whose core assumptions Okin wholeheartedly accepts, for its unrealistically individualist and rational conception of persons that may not be conducive to forming caring relationships at the heart of the family. If “mutually disinterested” persons are completely ignorant of any concrete and particular aspects of themselves including gender, it may be possible that the agreed upon institution of family would be more just to both sexes, as Okin has envisioned. This would be no small achievement, since realizing justice, even if it may be a “moral minimum,” is difficult (Held 1993, 227). While families need “a floor of justice if they lack it,” however, families should aim higher than justice (228). What is truly necessary for families is “[b]uilding relations of trust and consideration [that] far exceeds what justice can assure” (227). Although Okin seems to presume that restructuring the family according to justice principles would enhance the capacity for empathy for all members of the family, including children (Okin, 185), this is not necessarily so. As Noddings rightly points out, “‘cooperative virtues’ such as justice and fairness” are “derived from a rational assessment,” *not* empathy or feeling of care (2002, 94).

A more serious problem with the Rawlsian perspective is that it conceives of forming a family as just a personal choice that individuals may easily opt out of. Rawlsian persons are not obligated to form caring relationships, including the family, and the obligation to show empathy and care is at best only a conditional one. The primary moral obligation for Rawlsian persons is to adhere to the principles of justice. Provided that they fulfill this obligation, they are free to

choose any life plan that suits their particular taste, however impoverished or barren it may be. In other words, even if the once mutually disinterested individuals in the Original Position may have a choice to lead a life fully connected to other people when the veil is lifted (cf. Kohlberg, Levine, and Hwer, 22–27; Sher, 186–187), they may choose not to do so and remain “mutually disinterested” even in real life. This is consistent with fundamental tenets of liberalism that have “settled on wanting and rationality as the basic characteristics of human life” (Noddings 2002, 79) and not on caring and empathy. Given the sad reality in which those who try to care for others and maintain caring relationships in the family are often exploited, it is not inconceivable that many people would prefer an individualistic and career-oriented plan of life, forgoing the opportunity to form a family that entails obligations of care, especially toward children, for an extended period of time (cf. Baier, 49, 53; cf. Held 1993, 187, 212, chap. 10; Whitbeck, 55–58).

Care ethicists concerned with the implications of the liberal conception of persons presupposed by the Rawlsian perspective have proposed an alternative conception of persons that entails a radically different vision of an ideal human society and the family. Their “relational” conception of persons views the person as intricately enmeshed in human relationships for two reasons: First, care ethics takes human relationships as “ontologically basic” (Noddings 1984, 4). The “basic fact of human existence” (ibid.) is that we are beings enmeshed in relationships with “actual flesh-and-blood other human beings for whom we have actual feelings and with whom we have real ties” (Held 1993, 58). Not only does our survival depend on relationships, but our identity is constituted by them as well (Whitbeck, 62). We come to realize who we are only through interactions with various others throughout our lives, and our sense of self is in a continuous process of modification and alteration in such interactions. “A person is an historical being whose history is fundamentally a history of relationships to other people” (Whitbeck, 64). Second, intimate and caring human relationships have normative priority in care ethics. The caring relationship is the most “superior” kind of human relationship (Noddings 1984, 83), and, as a “pre-moral good” (ibid., 84), it ultimately grounds morality. It is because we categorically value and desire to be in caring relationships that we are motivated to be moral at all (ibid., 5). The most significant moral imperative in care ethics, then, is to form and maintain caring relationships. We might call this the “care principle.”¹³

Although this principle can be applied to the broader realm in which we encounter strangers, the care principle is applicable first and foremost to a small circle of people around the

one caring, for whom “natural” caring arises. In this sense, the family, especially with children, has central significance in care ethics. While care ethics does not valorize all kinds of relationships—for some can be destructive or abusive—the mother-child relation, the “mothering relation,” is taken to be the caring relation par excellence in which caring, primarily expressed as “natural caring,” is most saliently exhibited (Noddings 1984, 30–31). Mothering is a distinctly cultural activity, involving language and culture, that “forms human social personhood” and “develops morality” for all of us who were once children (Held 1993, 55, 60). Individuals of both sexes, however, can be a “mothering person” who “protects, nurtures, and trains” a child (Held 1993, 35). “Possibly fathers could come to be as emotionally close, or as close through caretaking, to children as mothers are” (80). Persons, whether biological mothers or not, are encouraged to care for growing children, especially by forming families. An ideal family according to care ethics would, then, be first and foremost one in which spouses of both sexes share equally their primary responsibility to mother their children, whatever other functions they may perform outside of the family. In this sense, gender would no longer be relevant to care ethics, just as in the justice perspective.

Natural caring exemplified in mothering should be emulated by parties in other relations among adults, such as the spousal relation and friendship. In order to signify the broader applicability of the care principle to non-familial relations, then, let us use Noddings’s terms the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” rather than “mother” and “child,” to refer to parties to a caring relationship. What does acting in accordance with the care principle imply in practice? Ideally, caring for others involves “seeing others *thickly*, as constituted by their particular human face, their particular psychological and social self” (Flanagan and Jackson, 623; emphasis added). Seeing others “thickly” implies being attentive to the particular personal history, emotional states, particular idiosyncrasies, and needs of others, and respecting and nourishing their unique individuality by continuously engaging in actual dialogues with them (cf. Held 1993, 41; Gilligan, 29–31). The focus should be on the cared-for’s welfare, and the one-caring should always try to direct “[one’s] attention, [one’s] mental engrossment . . . on the cared-for, not on [oneself]” (Noddings 1984, 24; see also Held 1993, 205). In other words, care ethics is an ethic of responsibility, as opposed to an ethic of rights, best represented by liberalism. Regardless of whether the cared-for has any right to the care and protection of the one-caring, the one-caring has a responsibility to offer care and prevent harm.

Actualizing the ideal of care ethics would require more radical changes in society than actualizing the ideal family from the justice perspective. Recall that Okin's complaint was that the family was excluded from institutions to which the principles of justice would apply. To the extent that society at large already advocates the principles of justice, there is no need for radical ideological changes. In care ethics, the demand is not simply that society ought to facilitate individual households to transform into caring families, but that every aspect of society should also be radically transformed according to the care principle (Held 1993, 214, 223). Contrary to the justice perspective that requires "importing" into the family principles derived from the public realm, care ethics demands that "we should export to the wider society the relations suitable for mothering persons and children. ... The household instead of the marketplace might then provide a model for society" (Held 1993, 202; see also Noddings 2002, 1). This is a radical proposal, especially given the current state of affairs in which the care principle is simply not considered to be a principle fit for social transformation, while the principles of justice are. The obstacles that care ethics has to overcome are incomparably greater than those facing the justice perspective.

An ideal society according to care ethics would consider "the proper care and suitable development of all children" as its central concern (Held 1993, 225) and require "social arrangements offering the kinds of economic and educational and child care and health care support" that social members need (Held 2006, 136).¹⁴ In an ideal caring society, caring work which is currently largely uncompensated or receives only a nominal payment will be "compensated more in line than it is with its [properly] evaluated worth." More importantly, it will be recognized that "its exchange or market value is one of the least appropriate ways in which to think of its value" (2006, 109). In a caring society, "the context of care is the wider one" within which justice, which rules over much of what is now considered the public realm, must be ensconced (146). As society is structured according to the care principle, "pressures for political conflict and legal coercion" and "the commodification of and the commercial competition over much that has value" would decrease. Accordingly, the realms of the market, rights and law would be limited (137).

III. Assessing Western Alternatives from an East Asian perspective

For those living in liberal Western societies who value individual freedom to choose plans of life that may or may not involve forming and maintaining a family, the Rawlsian view with Okin's modification may work. In the East Asian context still immersed in the Confucian tradition, however, it is doubtful that such a conception of the family would be feasible. While much of the traditionally Confucian East Asia may no longer be explicitly Confucian and liberal values are spreading rapidly in such societies, it is undeniable that the Confucian tradition still operates at "the most basic level of the popular consciousness and in the routines of daily life" (Koh, 194) in many East Asian societies. One of the core axioms of Confucianism is that the Confucian person is "irreducibly interpersonal" (Ames 1991, 105), as it has meaningful existence only in human relations, among which the family relation is central. In other words, the overwhelming majority in East Asia consciously or subconsciously subscribes to the Confucian conception of the self as relational and regards the family as central to their lives. For those who view persons as essentially relational the conception of persons presupposed by the justice perspective would seem too atomistic and impoverished. Similarly, the vision of the family promoted by the justice perspective would seem woefully inadequate.

The ideal family in care ethics, on the other hand, may seem promising in the East Asian context. Both Confucianism and care ethics emphasize the role of emotions, the relational nature of persons, and the importance of maintaining relationships as a moral goal. Indeed, some Confucians have pointed out certain affinities that Confucianism shares with care ethics (Li; Rosemont), and at least one scholar claims that feminism in Confucian societies might take "a new form of Confucianism" (Li, 86). Let me consider this proposal by examining similarities between the two perspectives.¹⁵ First of all, both Confucianism and care ethics take caring familial relations as not only psychosocially but also normatively significant. Since humans are by nature relational and cannot live worthy human lives apart from human relationships, both perspectives consider nurturing and maintaining such relationships as the most important moral end. In particular, the most intimate family relation—the parent-child relation in Confucianism and the mother-child relation in care ethics—is regarded by both positions as the most significant relation that must be promoted and protected, although for different reasons. For Confucianism, it is a relation that must be maintained for its symbolic significance as the "root" of *ren*, while for care ethics it is valorized as the model relationship of care due to natural caring inherent in such relations.

A second similarity between Confucianism, especially of the Mencian kind, and care ethics is the intimate connection they make between emotion and morality. According to both perspectives, empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and caring are prerequisites for morality, and a truly moral person is not someone who rationally controls her emotions but someone who develops such positive emotions to the fullest. The Confucian person is a moral being with the “moral mind” (*xin* 心) (Tu 1979c, 67; cf. *Mencius* 4A.12; 6A.15), which consists of four kinds of feelings: commiseration (*ceyin* 惻隱), shame and dislike (*xiuwu* 羞惡), modesty and yielding (*cirang* 辭讓), and the sense of right and wrong (*shifei* 是非) (*Mencius* 2A.6). These four feelings, if preserved, provide the “beginnings” of the four “constant” Confucian virtues of *ren* (humanheartedness 仁), *yi* (righteousness 義), *li* (propriety 禮), and *zhi* (wisdom 智), respectively (*Mencius* 2A.6). Morality therefore is none other than the full actualization of these emotional germinations in Confucian virtues. In care ethics, on the other hand, caring is itself partly emotional. When we naturally care for someone, we first and foremost “feel with” the person (Noddings 1984, 30), although natural caring involves more than feeling, as it requires non-emotional elements such as motivational shift (*ibid.*, 33). However, both the feeling of care and motivational shift are ultimately “fundamentally nonrational” (61).

Do these similarities warrant the conclusion that the precept of *ren* and the care principle are equivalent and that Confucianism can encompass care ethics to become the East Asian feminism of the future? I do not believe that this is the case. Even if we focus on the Mencian interpretation of *ren* as “love with distinction” derived from the emotion of “commiseration,” *ren* is not equivalent to caring advocated by care ethics. The reason is this: The method endorsed by Confucianism to actualize *ren* is incommensurable with the method required by care ethics to express caring. In care ethics, the way to promote and protect caring relations is for the one-caring to see the other “thickly,” to be attentive and responsive to the particular characteristics of the cared-for, to see things from the perspective of the cared-for, and to work together with the cared-for to actualize the “best self” of which he or she is capable. To some extent, it requires the one-caring, who is usually in a position superior to that of the cared-for, whether emotionally, morally, or intellectually, to tear down the emotional boundaries that separate herself and the cared-for and to merge with the latter as if to become his or her alter ego. The emotion of natural caring is not only fundamental as a prerequisite for caring relations, but the ideal caring relation

must achieve intimate emotional union between the one-caring and the cared-for. In care ethics, emotion gains normative significance.

In Confucianism, on the other hand, this is not the case. Emotion is indeed fundamental as the “beginning” of Confucian virtues. For example, *ren* arises from feelings of commiseration. However, following the precept of *ren* actually requires distancing oneself from unreflective and visceral emotion, even in the case of the parent-child relation. The reason is that *ren* must be expressed through proper *li*, in refined and communally accepted formal standards. As Sin Yee Chan points out (2006), *li* involves *jing* (respect or reverence, 敬) toward others. Indeed, various sources in *Mencius* (*Mencius* 2A: 6; 4B:28; 6A: 6) suggest that “*jing* is the central element of *li* just as love is to *ren*” (Chan, 237). *Jing*, whatever else it may imply,¹⁶ implies at the very least “seriousness toward a person” which involves “taking to heart a person’s claims on us and dutifully expressing our responsibility toward that person” (Chan, 233) in a deferential manner (Chan, 235; cf. *Mencius* 6A:5), dispensing with “a casual, playful, slighting, contemptuous, or dismissive attitude toward a person” (Chan, 233). As such, *jing* entails some deferential distance between the one expressing *jing* and the object of *jing*. Consequently, spontaneous expressions of emotion are in general prohibited. Even in the case of the parent-child relation, as we have seen, in which children are required to show the requisite *li* of affection, the consistent theme is to be respectful (*jing*) toward parents (2.7; *Xiao jing* 孝經, bk. 2). In *Li ji* 禮記, in which how to comport oneself in front of parents is extensively discussed, the unifying theme is again to serve one’s parents sincerely and to maintain a deferential and respectful manner and attitude, which implies some emotional distance between parents and children.

Still, would Confucianism not require more emotional involvement in the case of parents’ treatment of children? Strangely, there is in Confucianism an eerie silence concerning the *li* of affection required of parents toward children. It is not entirely clear why Confucianism has placed such disproportionate burden to fulfill the duty of affection on children. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Confucian tradition evolved in farming villages in which adult children were dependent on parents, as the inheritance of the family farm was crucial for their survival. Most Confucian relations, however, presuppose reciprocity (Tu 1986, p. 180; Tu 1979b, p. 18), and if one party to the relation does not act in accordance with *ren* and express appropriate *li*, then the other party need not reciprocate (cf. *Mencius* 1B.8; 4B.30). Therefore, it is possible to reinterpret the *li* of parent-child relation to include duties of parents to express proper affection

toward children.¹⁷ If so, then might it not be possible to interpret the proper *li* of affection that parents ought to express toward children as involving emotional intimacy? If so, then a case could be made that Confucianism and care ethics are similar.

I would like to advance, however, a thesis that, even in this case, deferential distance is required of the *li* of affection. The primary responsibility of parents toward children is to enable them to develop the virtue of *ren* so that they can become good Confucian persons. For this, parents must serve as role models for children of self-cultivation and Confucian virtues, so that children can learn to become responsible Confucian citizens of the wider world by following parents' examples. Essentially, parents must take on the role of moral educators of children, by becoming moral exemplars themselves. They should be properly affectionate toward children, complimenting them on their good deeds and encouraging them to develop good character and self-esteem. Their love toward children, however, should never be too emotional or over-indulgent, but restrained, disciplined, and respectful. They should discipline children to develop good habits and chasten them when they go astray and commit wrong deeds. Punishment may be involved in this process, as long as it is properly, unemotionally, and fairly administered, making sure that children themselves understand why it is appropriate. Again, the key is respect even in expressing affection toward children, which implies some emotional restraint. All the while, parents must consider themselves as teachers, not as friends.¹⁸

Confucianism, therefore, does not recommend that parents and children become intimate "alter-egos" of each other, in stark contrast to what care ethics prescribes, which is to dismantle emotional and psychological barriers and to become friends on equal terms. Given this fundamental difference between care ethics and Confucianism, it is certainly not the case that care ethics can be "a new form of Confucianism." While it would not be logically impossible for feminists in traditionally Confucian societies to attempt to import care ethics and transform the Confucian family into the family idealized by care ethics, this would require a complete dismantling of the Confucian family as we know it and a long period of transformation of the family institution in East Asia.

IV. A Feminist Friendly Conception of the Confucian Family

If exogenous conceptions of the family promoted by Western feminists are in one way or another alien to Confucian sensibilities, it might be worthwhile to examine whether core

ideas of Confucianism might render a feminist friendly conception of the family that does not require East Asians to abandon their Confucian tradition and sensibilities altogether. This is the task undertaken in this section. Engaging in this task does not imply that I believe that Western alternatives may never work in East Asia. Nor should it be construed as an attempt to ignore Confucianism's patriarchal past. I am not forestalling the possibility that, given sufficient adjustment and adaptation, Western feminist conceptions of the family may take root in East Asia in some indefinite future. As the second section amply illustrates, neither am I attempting to elide the patriarchal history of the Confucian family. Examining whether a feminist friendly conception of the Confucian family could be constructed, however, is a meaningful endeavor, as its success would provide a feminist alternative that may be more easily applicable in the East Asian context. It would certainly contribute to a feminist future in East Asia that is uniquely Confucian.

Let us begin this project by examining the theoretical foundation of Confucianism as was laid down by Confucius and Mencius. Their conception of the Confucian person provides not only a good theoretical beginning but also an apt point of comparison with the Western feminist perspectives previously considered: As mentioned, the Confucian person is first and foremost a moral being with the moral mind (*xin* 心), which consists of the aforementioned four kinds of feelings that can potentially develop into the four cardinal Confucian virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*. The moral mind is common to all humanity, sages and ordinary humans alike (cf. *Mencius* 3A.1, 6A.7, 6A.10; *Analects* 17.2): “[A]ll human beings are endowed with the authentic possibility to develop themselves as moral persons through the cognitive and affective functions of the mind” (Tu 1989, 46). The embodiment of the four virtues by preserving and developing the four beginnings is the Confucian moral ideal.

In achieving the Confucian moral ideal, the most significant Confucian virtue is *ren* and the most important Confucian principle is that we ought to embody *ren*—I call this the precept of *ren*. *Ren* is not merely a “particular virtue” of human relations, but a “general virtue” in its “inclusiveness” of other Confucian virtues (W.Chan 1955, 298; see also, Fung, 72; *Analects* 13.27). Some even attribute to it a special status as “a principle of inwardness,” which will guide the Confucian person toward moral perfection (Tu 1979a, 9). Construed thus, the process of actualizing *ren* is “practically identical” to the process of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) (ibid., 6; cf. *Analects* 14.25). Self-cultivation is a very strenuous life-long

process of self-education to reach the highest stage of moral perfection, often involving pain and suffering (*Analects* 8.7). Given the arduousness of self-cultivation, only a small number of persons would persist in it throughout their lives; those who succeed may earn the title of *junzi* (君子, noble person) (cf. *Mencius* 6A.15; 4B.19).

Confucian self-cultivation, however, occurs within the confines of human relationships; maintaining harmonious human relationships is an integral component of it (Tu 1979b, 20, 22, 25). Accordingly, *ren* manifests in concrete human relations as “love” (*ai* 愛) for others (W.Chan 1955, 299; *Analects* 12.22), predicated on the feeling of sympathy. The reason why the family relation is of crucial importance is that it is where Confucian persons experience and practice love for the first time. As mentioned before, this is why *ren*, especially in its Mencian interpretation, is often translated as “love with distinction.”

Yet the Confucian *ren* as love, even interpreted in the Mencian way, neither implies egoism centered on one’s family nor is primarily emotional. Let me address the point about family-centeredness first: Despite the Confucian emphasis on the parent-child relation (*Analects* 1.2; *Mencius* 4A.27, 6B. 3, 7A.15), the Confucian person must embrace all in his or her love (*Mencius* 7A.46; W.Chan 1955, 303). The concept of love with distinction is concerned primarily with “the application of love” and implies that there is “an order, a gradation, or distinction, starting with filial piety” when exercising the virtue of *ren* (301). In other words, we must apply the lessons about love learned within the family to non-familial relations, albeit in a diluted fashion. Therefore, Mencius urged, “Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then, by extension, also the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then, by extension, also the young in other families” (*Mencius* IA.7). As implied in Mencius’s statement that “All the myriad things are there in me” (7A.4), the true Confucian self is “an open system” (Tu 1986, 183) at the center of “a series of concentric circles, ... the outer rim of [which] never closes.” The precept of *ren*, then, requires “the broadening and deepening ‘embodiment’ of an ever-expanding web of human relationships” (188).

What about *ren*’s emotionality? Although *ren*’s “beginning” is the emotion of commiseration, *ren* itself is not emotional. The proper manifestation of *ren* as love is “To be able from one’s own self to draw a parallel for the treatment of others” (*Analects* 6.28) and to “put oneself into the position of others” (Fung, 71). This is none other than the “Golden Rule,”

encompassing both of its positive and negative requirements. The positive requirement is expressed in the concept of *zhong* (conscientiousness¹⁹ 忠), which is to “establish” and “enlarge” others as well as oneself (*Analects* 6.28; *Zhongyong* 中庸13; see also, Fung 71). The negative requirement is implied in the concept of *shu* (reciprocity²⁰ 恕), which prohibits imposing on others what one does not want to be imposed on oneself (*Analects* 1.4, 4.15, 5.11, 12.12, 15.23; *Daxue* 大學 10). The “one thread that runs through [Confucius’s] doctrines” is, therefore, none other than “*zhong* and *shu* (忠恕)” (*Analects* 4.15), which I shall call the principle of *zhongshu*.

Further, *ren* as *zhongshu* must be expressed in *li*, as *ren* is “to subdue oneself (*keji* 克己) and [to] return to *li* (*fuli* 復禮) (*Analects* 12.1).” Not surprisingly, the first conjunct implies self-cultivation. Although *li* typically refers to intersubjective “norms and standards of proper behavior” that accord with public expectations pertaining to each role in core human relations, it is not the same as accepted conventions of one’s society (Tu 1979a, 12). Rather *li* represents “enlightened” and “refined” norms of comportment in the five human relations in the spirit of *ren* (Cua, 162; cf. *Analects* 9.3 *Analects* 3.3, 15.17; *Mencius* 4B.6; Fung, 66, 70) that accord with the principle of *zhongshu*. Consequently, *fuli* implies restoring the proper standards/norms of each relational role according to the principle of *zhongshu*. *Ren* as *kejifuli*, then, actually requires overcoming one’s emotions.

Would it be possible to construct a feminist friendly conception of the Confucian family based on the core ideas and values of Confucianism, as elaborated above? I believe so, and I would like to suggest further that, at least in the traditionally Confucian East Asia, promoting this ideal may be more feasible than importing and adapting foreign conceptions of the family predicated on Western values. But what is the ideal Confucian family that is also feminist friendly?

As a first step, let us go back to the conception of the family that Confucius and Mencius endorsed, which many take as the ideal Confucian family. Even this conception of the family, however, may not be consistent with the core Confucian tenets, as it is not “based on theoretical reasons” but rather on “prejudices or the particular conditions” of traditional Confucian societies (Chan 2008, 164). I believe that the litmus test for determining whether Confucius and Mencius’s conception of the family is consistent with the core Confucian tenets

is to ask whether it is compatible with the Confucian moral precept to embody the virtue of *ren* (仁).

When this is done, the functional justification of *pie* is unjustifiable, even if one grants that some division of labor may be necessary in the husband-wife relation. As mentioned earlier, there is no justifiable reason why women should not be considered as moral persons capable of self-cultivation. The confinement of women in the domestic sphere by emphasizing functional distinction prevents their self-cultivation that involves “a continuous process of extension” of *li* (Tu 1979b, 24). As we have seen, the true Confucian self is “an open system” and the completion of his or her self-cultivation, while starting with the family, must include “the universe as a whole” (1979b, 29). The precept of *ren*, in other words, requires that Confucian persons, whether women or men, extend their love to others in an ever wider circle of human relations in the process of self-cultivation, while taking family as the center of “concentric circles.” Refusing to extend oneself outward “restricts us to a closed circle” (Tu 1986, 188), thereby stunting our moral growth. Confining women in the domestic sphere, then, constitutes an unwarranted restriction of women’s moral growth, which goes against the core Confucian precept.

Arguing for women’s expansion of the “web of human relationships” does not imply that women should abandon their role as mother/housewife entirely and become nominal men. Indeed, “taking care of family affairs is itself active participation in politics” (Tu 1986, 189; cf. *Analects* 2.21), as the family itself is intimately connected to the public realm as “the training ground for moral cultivation” (S.Chan 2008, 150). Yet the mother’s role of educating the next generation to become active participants of the public sphere depends on her understanding the crucial connection between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, which is in turn predicated on her being an active participant in the public sphere herself. Therefore, women *must* engage in the public sphere in varying degrees, just as men *must* engage in the domestic sphere in varying degrees. Variations may exist in the extent to which each person engages in either sphere, depending on his/her disposition and preferences. This variation, however, should not pose a problem for Confucianism, since both spheres enable self-cultivation, provided that persons maintain a reasonable balance between the two spheres. A woman’s decision to cultivate herself by concentrating more on the public sphere would be perfectly acceptable in Confucianism, as would a man’s decision to cultivate himself by focusing more on the domestic

sphere. Indeed, if a woman decides that she prefers to cultivate herself mainly in the public sphere by opting not to marry, she would still be a respectable Confucian agent, provided that she fulfills her filial and familial duties to her parents and relatives.

The Mencian conception of *pie*, understood as functional distinction that neatly coincides with the sexual divide, may also contradict the precept of *ren* understood as the principle of *zhongshu*, especially the negative part *shu*/reciprocity that proscribes imposing on others what one does not want to be imposed on oneself. Given the morally justifiable diversity of human disposition, it is implausible to insist that the household division of labor ought to be predetermined unilaterally for all couples with the man focusing on the outside and the woman concentrating on the inside. The division of labor must be decided on a case-by-case basis. A husband, especially if he enjoys public participation and dislikes domestic activities himself, ought not to coerce the wife into domestic confinement, but engage in a mutually respectful conversation in order to determine her true preferences and a just division of household labor in accordance with the principle of reciprocity. If a man who enjoys domestic affairs more than public affairs and a woman who has the opposite disposition marry, they may decide to divide their labor according to their preferences. This would still be a division of labor based on functional distinction, but the content of the division would be reversed from what is prescribed by the Mencian *pie*. If the Mencian interpretation of *pie* is contradictory to the core Confucian tenets in this way, this implies that the concept of *pie* as a strict division of labor between sexes would lose significance in an ideal Confucian family.

The conception of the ideal Confucian family should be predicated on its most fundamental function as the wellspring of and practicing ground for the virtue of *ren* for every member of the household, whether male or female. The parent-child relation is still central to the Confucian family, as parents are the first and the most significant teachers/trainers of the Confucian virtue of *ren* for children. In order for children to learn about and develop *ren*, children must experience, especially in the early stages of their lives, stable love of parents. Through parents' constant and unwavering yet disciplined love, children learn to love others as well as appreciate their own worth and develop self-esteem. The latter is crucial to enabling children to hold themselves up to high moral standards of Confucianism. Yet, parents' love must never be expressed in a manner that is indulgent, arbitrary, or emotional, as children must be properly disciplined to develop capacities for self-cultivation and Confucian virtues. Parents

must first be themselves role models of self-cultivation and Confucian virtues for children. As moral teachers of children, parents' love toward children should be restrained, level-headed, disciplined, and respectful of children's potential as *junzis*. Children, as they mature, must reciprocate their parents' restrained love by expressing the proper *li* of affection toward their parents that requires respect and deference.²¹ In this way, the ideal Confucian family would be a true learning and training ground for children of both sexes to become virtuous Confucian persons who practice *ren* in their interactions with others.²² The ideal Confucian family, understood thus, is eminently compatible with the feminist ideal of gender equality.

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² Traditionally, the five Confucian human relations are those between king and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friend and friend.

³ This should be distinguished from the neo-Confucian concept of *li* (理), which is never used in this paper.

⁴ For this reason, I focus in this paper on Korea. Yet the conclusions drawn in this paper would have relevance for other East Asian countries that have traditionally been Confucian in varying degrees.

⁵ The *Zhuzijiali* (朱子家禮) is one of the best known.

⁶ On this, I rely on Deuchler 1992, Chapter 6. All citations in this section are from this book, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Early Chosôn Confucians followed the ancient custom of China, which allowed a feudal lord to “take at one time nine women, a minister or a great officer one wife and two concubines, and a common officer one wife and one concubine” (233).

⁸ Women, however, were strictly prohibited from having any sexual relation other than with the husband. For example, a wife of a high official who committed adultery was decapitated as a model in 1423 (259).

⁹ Indeed, both for men and women, not marrying was “socially inconceivable” (243).

¹⁰ Lower-class women were exceptions, as they had to participate in the public realm for their own and their families’ survival. However, they were not exempt from the patriarchal ideology.

¹¹ Traditionally, a wife can be driven out of the husband’s home (where she was required to reside after marriage) and returned to her maiden home if she (a) disobeys parents-in-law, (b) cannot produce sons, (c) has (or has thoughts of having) an extramarital affair, (d) is jealous of other women with whom her husband has sexual relations, (e) suffers from an incurable and prolonged illness that dissipates family resources, (f) interferes too much with and is vociferous about the husband’s affairs, and (g) steals.

¹² It is interesting to note that some Rawlsian theorists have criticized [Okin’s application of Rawls’s theory to feminism. See, Cohen 1997.](#)

¹³ Whether there can be a care “principle” and what its status might be is a moot question within care ethics. Although Noddings vehemently rejects all general principles for their inability to “preserve the uniqueness of human encounters” (Noddings 1984, 5; cf. 36, 84–85), Held rightfully warns against the tendency to reject all kinds of

principles since this entails an “invitation to capriciousness” (Held 1993, 75). I agree with Held that care ethics endorses principles that are “compatible with particular judgments based . . . on feelings of empathy and on caring concern” (ibid., p. 35).

¹⁴ For Noddings’s proposal for developing social policies based on care, see chapter 11 (2002). Other examples of attempts to apply the care principle to society at large and beyond include Tronto (1993) and Robinson (1999).

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Herr 2003.

¹⁶ I shall not discuss here Chan’s further claim that *jing* as “an intentional state” also implies, in addition to “seriousness,” “the recognition of the worth of its object” (232) on a par with the Western concept of respect.

¹⁷ See Tu 1986, 181.

¹⁸ Some historical examples of the Confucian childrearing that support my thesis can be found in E.S. Lee 2009.

¹⁹ This is W.Chan’s translation (1963).

²⁰ Tu’s translation (1986).

²¹ Concerning its outer form, the representative Confucian family would be consanguineous extended families, both patrilineal and matrilineal, based on the natural feeling of love and affection. Although heterosexual couples may be the norm, the Confucian family may include same sex unions with children and their extended families, as the Confucian family’s core function is to enable children to learn and practice *ren*.

²² The *li of pie* pertaining to the spouse relation is then not essential to the family’s main function. It may be adhered to, but only to the extent necessary to run the household efficiently. The sexual component ought to be discarded, leaving each couple to decide on how to determine the division of labor.