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Roles and Representations of Women in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Survey

Abstract An understanding of the roles and representations of women in classical Chinese philosophy is here derived from central texts such as the *Analects*, the *Lienu Zhuan*, and the *I Ching*. We argue that the roles of women during the classical period of Chinese philosophy tended to be as part of the "inner," working domestically as a housewife and mother. This will be shown from three passages from the *Analects.* Women were represented as submissive and passive, as with the qualities ascribed to *yin* energy, and therefore as rightfully subordinate to men. However, despite representations of women in philosophy being thus at this time, there were exceptions, specific women who could take a male "outer" political role. The story of Ling Liang from the *Lienu Zhuan* suggests that although women being involved in "outer" affairs was looked down on, there were still women who would be and who would occasionally get praised for doing so. This shows that it was realised, explicitly or otherwise, that women were capable of taking those roles, but also that they were not allowed to take such roles at that time.

Keywords women, roles, *yin/yang*, early Chinese philosophy, distinctions

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1 Introduction

This paper considers the roles and representations of women in Chinese philosophy, looking particularly at the classical period [5th–3rd Century BCE] (see Goldin 2019) of Confucius, his disciples, and certain post-Confucian thinkers. The main texts we will consider are the *Analects*, the *Lienu Zhuan*, the *I Ching* and further writings from philosophers in the tradition of classical Chinese philosophy.

Section 2 of this paper looks into the origin of the *yin-yang* distinction, in order to consider its original meaning. It then discusses the works of Dong Zhongshu, and how he may have introduced the correlation between the *yin-yang* distinction and gender to Confucianism. We then consider the different qualities associated with *yin/feminine* and *yang/masculine* and discuss whether this *yin-yang* gender distinction may have been a foundation for the roles given to women and how they were represented during the classical Confucian period. Section 3 of this paper considers three passages from the *Analects* which mention women and analyses these passages to consider how women were represented in this text. The idea that in the text women were represented as subordinate to men regardless of their class or wealth will be explored further. Here, we also consider a biography of a woman named Ling Liang from the *Lienu Zhuan*.

Section 4 looks specifically at one of the oldest sacred texts of Confucianism, the *I Ching*. It explores the passages which refer to women and wives to discuss the idea that women were also represented as subordinate to men, similarly to the *Analects.* The *I*

Ching also offers some interesting opposing passages to those previously discussed, to suggest a more harmonious representation of a husband and wife's relationship. Throughout the exploration of these texts, this paper will refer back to and consider how the *yin-yang* gender distinction may play a role in the representation of women during this time. Lastly, the final section, Section 5, will consider discussions of women in the works of post-Confucian thinkers, such as Mozi, Mencius, Laozi, and Xunzi, especially noting the introduction of the term "distinctions" used to describe the differences between men and women.

2 *Yin-Yang* and Women

The *yin-yang* distinction has been thought to help in understanding the roles and representations of women in Chinese philosophy. However, it was not originally a gendered distinction. It explained opposites, such as dark and light, up and down, old and young, summer and winter, and movement and rest, and would have been used to describe natural phenomena, such as the light and weather (Wang 2019), and the cycle of the day rotating from light to dark. As well as stating those opposites, the distinction implied that they must work together to create harmony, to keep humans evenly balanced between heaven and earth (Wang 2012, 2). However, the introduction of *yin-yang* into Confucianism did then affect that tradition's representations of women.

Although it was originally used to understand harmony and to follow routine, after it was introduced into Confucianism the *yin-yang* construct was also applied to gender. There is no reason to think that this happened, though, until Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒（179–104 BCE), the chief minster to Emperor Wu during the Han dynasty (Duignan 2019). His gendering of the *yin-yang* distinction has been traced back to his writings in *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (*Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露) (Wang 2005, 212). His innovation was to add to the way the construct was already used as a distinction between cosmological features (heaven and earth, etc.) to apply it also to two different kinds of energy. Dong claimed that "The *yinyang* of heaven and earth should be man and woman; man and woman should be *yinyang*" (Wang 2012, 100). By this, he meant that humans possess some of the energy of *yin-yang*, more specifically that women possessed *yin* energy, and men possessed *yang* energy. This gendering of *yin-yang* energy may have been the result of noticing that the differences ascribed to these energies is similar to the existing and supposedly natural differences between males and females, and their roles within society. Further, Dong also introduced the idea that *yin* and *yang* energies exhibit a gendered difference in their causal powers. If too much rain was causing flooding, for example, he suggested that women with *yin* were to be moved away whilst men with *yang* were to come out in public. This is because he believed that the extreme weather conditions were caused by an imbalance in *yin-yang* energy (Wang 2005, 213). This clearly demonstrates how Dong introduced the

idea of *yin-yang* energy and division for humans and genders, and that he believed the energy in humans could affect the harmony and order of heaven and earth. This may be because the relationship between *yin* and *yang* within human's energy reflects the relationship and order of heaven and earth. It is the same energy which moves both humans and heaven above, described by Dong as "dislikes, happiness and anger" in humans, and "warm and chilly, hot and cold" in heaven (Wang 2005, 212–13). Further, Dong also suggested that *yin* and *yang* were displayed in politics and government. This is because *yang*, the bright and strong energy, has the abilities and qualities to be the energy for these activities, which *yin*, the dark and weak energy, should avoid (Wang 2005, 219). This clearly suggests a rationale for the existing difference in political roles for women and men, which we will further discuss while also considering how women would have been represented due to the *yin-yang* gender distinction.

A first thought about the *yin-yang* gender distinction introduced by Dong might expect it to represent women as equal to men, due to the balance needed between the two opposites to complement each other and create harmony. This may appear to be the case, especially with sexual intercourse, however the divide between the *yin* and *yang* in fact represented women as both different from and inferior to men. Robin Wang explains this clearly, saying "although both heaven and earth are necessary and inseparable, heaven is elevated. This view puts male and female on a different scale; male is higher and weightier than female" (Wang 2012, 106). This highlights the difference in power

between *yin* and *yang* and female and male. Rather than thinking of *yin* and *yang* as a "harmony" of equals, Dong conceived of it as "unity" (Wang 2005, 216). This changed the dynamic between the two, and may have affected the representation of women in Confucian philosophy by automatically associating them with *yin*, making them appear inferior to *yang*, associated with men.

The qualities typically associated with *yin* and *yang* differ significantly. This is worth considering when looking at how women were represented, as the qualities of *yin* were associated with women. Positive *yin* energy associated with women would have been creative, intuitive, and loving. More negative *yin* energy associated with women would however have been manipulative, jealous, and bitter (Foley 2010, 27). Roles assigned to women based on these qualities would have marked them off clearly from roles assigned to men. For example, if women were thought to have had nurturing qualities associated with yin energy, this would have legitimised their being given roles such as being housewives and caring for children. This would also explain why women were not thought suitable for working in government or politics, the negative qualities of *yin* appearing inappropriate for such roles when contrasted with the positive qualities of *yang* attributed to men, these being strength, action, and productivity (Foley 2010, 28). The distinctions reflecting the roles of women are also apparent in early Confucian texts written for women, such as Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡) written during the Han dynasty [202 BCE-9CE]. Here, it is written that "the Way of husband and wife is

intimately connected with *Yin* and *Yang*" and that gentlemen "only know that wives must be controlled, and that the husband's rules of conduct manifesting his authority must be established" (Swan 1932, 84). This brings out both how *yin* and *yang* ought to create harmony to tradition, yet also how the *yin-yang* gender distinction represents women to be inferior to men, reflecting and reinforcing unequal relationships between husband and wife. Though unequal, both energies are thought to work together to create a unity and balance through carrying out different roles. This unity may be thought to be what maintains harmony between the energies. The separate qualities given to *yin* and *yang* offer an explanation for why women's roles did not include government, and why they were represented as inferior to men in these respects.

Overall, Dong Zhongshu's gendering of *yin-yang* and his application of it to humans separated men and women based on the qualities attributed to *yin* and *yang.* This would explain the foundation behind the roles and representations of women in Confucian philosophy. Because of the difference between the *yin* energy attributed to women and the *yang* energy attributed to men, with *yang* being the higher of the two, women were represented as inferior to men and unable to take on roles within government.

3 The *Analects* and Women

How might the original *yin-yang* distinction have been a foundation

within sacred texts such as the *Analects* and the *I Ching*, with regards to the roles and representation of women in philosophy during the classical Confucian period? The *Analects* is a text thought to have been compiled and written by the followers of Confucius [551–479 BCE] during the Warring States period [475–221 BCE]. There are only three passages within the text which refer to women. We will consider both the *Analects* and a section from the *Lienu Zhuan* (列女傳). We will show that, while women were already represented as inferior to men, and unsuitable to participate in government and politics, some women did nevertheless take part in these roles, even though their doing so was mostly looked down on by men during the time.

Analects 17.25 is arguably the passage which gives the most direct insight into how women were represented during the classical Confucian period in the works of Confucius:

> Women and small men are difficult to nurture. If you get too close to them, they become uncompliant, and if you stay too distant, they become resentful. (Eno 2015)

It is important to note that the translation of the word "*nuzie*" 女子, which is "woman" in English, may vary. For example, one cannot say for certain that Confucius was referring to either lower-classed women (who would be grouped with "small men," having a status such a servant (Kinney 2017, 150)), or instead to all women. What is more, the translation of "small men" here also varies between "inferior men"

(Muller 2018) and “petty persons” (Li 2000, 83).

Despite these different interpretations of its crucial words, 17.25 is probably the clearest passage showing how women were perceived by male philosophers during the classical Confucian period. Even if Confucius was referring only to lower-class women who were on the same social level as servants and “petty people,” and not to women as a whole, this passage still represents lower-class women who were unmarried and working within households as un-obliging and challenging persons to deal with. When written about in such a way, especially using the term “nurture,” it gives the impression that these women were not actually represented as adults, but more like difficult pets or children who men had to deal with carefully.

On the second interpretation, in which Confucius is referring to *all* women, women are represented as being at a much lower level than men. This is because “women” are here grouped with the “small,” “petty people,” who were thought to be lower-ranking men. This suggests that men could be distinguished by their social class, intelligence, occupations etc., whereas all women were regarded as lower, “uncompliant” and “resentful” regardless of their status, intelligence or occupation. Although this passage does give the impression that women were still regarded as people with opinions of their own, the use of the concept “petty” implies that their opinions were not thought to be worth considering. Therefore, if referring to all

women, then the representation of women in classical Confucian philosophy could be thought to be as bitter, disobedient and somewhat less than fully human. We suggest this because the passage appears to be written as guidance for men to understand women and "small" men, as if they ought to know how to "nurture" them. This raises the question whether women would have been given the opportunity to take part in intellectual roles if they were all just to be disregarded as difficult lower-status beings who needed to be taken care of.

Overall, both interpretations of *Analects* 17.25 give the impression that women during the classical Confucian period were represented as difficult, "petty" people that men would have had to be careful with, suggesting that they were not represented as individual, intellectual beings.

The second passage we will discuss, *Analects* 6.26, is rather different, as it is not a direct statement about women, but is instead about Confucius visiting a woman:

> The Master having visited Nanzi, Zulu was displeased, on which the Master swore, saying "If I have done anything improper, may Heaven reject me, may Heaven reject me!" (Kinney 2017, 153)

This passage is about Confucius, the Master, visiting a woman, Nanzi, and the unhappy reaction of a man, Zulu, about that meeting. Nanzi, who was thought to be the concubine of Duke Ling of Wei, had been described as promiscuous and failing to follow rituals (Foust 2016, 21–

22).

Despite not being as direct as 17.25, this passage does give some insight. Zulu may have been unhappy with Confucius visiting this woman because of her reputation as promiscuous and her inability to follow correct ritual regarding interactions between the sexes. Because Nanzi is one of very few women to be mentioned by name in the *Analects,* an impression might here be generated that women in general did not follow ritual correctly, and thus ought to be avoided.

It is also worth considering whether Confucius would have been visiting Nanzi to discuss political subjects. Nanzi is thought to have referred to herself as the "little king" (Foust 2016, 22) when inviting Confucius to visit, suggesting that she may have had some interest or involvement in government and politics. The second reason this passage is interesting is because, despite showing that men would be "displeased" with a woman discussing politics and what would generally be regarded as a 'man's job', it still displays Confucius himself willingly meeting with a woman to discuss such things. This might suggest several things. Firstly, it can tell us about the roles of women. The passage gives the impression that women were not supposed to be involved in "outer" affairs because men would disapprove, and their roles were to stay in the household doing tasks for women, such as weaving. This links back to the gendered *yin-yang* distinction, which implied that a woman's role involved more "inner"

(domestic) tasks, whereas a man's role would involve "outer" tasks, such as politics. Secondly, it can suggest that despite their roles not involving politics, some women would have still had the ability to discuss and engage in political affairs, and that this was not entirely looked down upon by educated men, if indeed Confucius met with Nanzi to do this. Finally, the existence of this passage may also suggest that women were represented as unworthy of occupations involving politics, government and general 'outer' affairs *because* of the attitude towards Confucius and Nanzi meeting. This may be reflected, for example, in later works such as Ban Zhao's *Nujie* (*Lessons for Women*), which was written to teach women how to behave appropriately. It states that "womanly words need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation" (Swan 1932, 86). This supports this interpretation of the passage by suggesting that women were not represented as equal to men with regard to occupation, and that women were not to partake in debate and discussion involving politics.

Overall, despite the passage being generally negative towards the idea of Confucius meeting with a woman, whether it be because she was promiscuous or because she was interested in state affairs, it still shows Confucius was willing to meet and talk with her, which may be regarded as a more positive representation of women and their roles during this period.

The third and final passage about women is *Analects* 8.20. Similarly to the previous passage, this only makes reference to one woman without making a direct statement about women in general:

> Shun possessed five ministers and the world was ordered. King Wu said, “I have ten ministers to curtail the chaos.” Confucius commented, “Talent is hard to find, is it not! In the times of Yao and Shun it was most abundant. And of the ten, one was a woman: it was merely nine” (Eno 2019).

This may also be translated to say that King Wu 周武王 had ten “able” ministers, or ten “ministers who are skilled” (Foust 2016, 25). The intended reading would then be that when Wu mentioned that he had ten ministers able and skilled in government affairs, Confucius claimed that the King only in fact had nine, because one of them was a woman, who would not usually have this role.

This third passage is telling about the roles of women during the classical Confucian period. Firstly, it can tell us that women could in fact have a role in the government, despite their assigned roles usually being ‘inner’. That King Wu, a male, would state that his female minister is ‘able’ or ‘skilled’ shows not only that he accepted a woman in the role of a government minister, but also that he praised her and her abilities in the role. This undoubtedly offers a more positive representation of women compared to the previous passages, demonstrating further that a woman’s role may not be as strictly confined to the qualities of *yin,* and that the occasional woman could possess the qualities and roles of the exterior *yang.* It is however important to consider Confucius’ response to King Wu’s statement,

saying that he only had nine ministers because one was a female. This is important because the *Analects* were written by Confucius' disciples as lessons from him to teach those reading that text. This means that Confucius' opinion would be of absolute authority because he was the teacher who those reading the text would have wanted to learn from. Confucius' comment may thus be that part of the passage which people would have taken away, representing women as unworthy or perhaps ministers lacking ability. This is highlighted particularly because, immediately after mentioning talent, Confucius claimed that of the ten ministers, there were only really nine. From this, presumably we are to understand that Confucius claimed that one woman was not really a minister because she was not a man and did not have a man's talent for the role.

Overall, this suggests that women should not take the role of a minister within government. This then supports the *yin-yang* gender distinction, and because Confucius was the authoritative figure of the book, the lesson to be taken from this passage appears to be that only men can be able ministers.

Though these three passages in the *Analects* appear to give women a generally negative representation during the classical Confucian period, it is worth discussing a woman mentioned in the *Lienu Zhuan.* This book, translated as *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, is a first-century BCE text which includes a chapter about a woman who lived during the same time as Confucius, and who Confucius spoke about.

Ling Liang is a woman who appears in the first section of the text,

entitled “The Maternal Models” (Kinney 2014, 1). She is described as the wife of the high-status official Gongfu Mubo, and mother of Wenbo. In the chapter about Ling, she explains the government and the roles of those working in the government to her son. This appears to be untraditional, as it displays her as a woman who both understood the “outer” roles of government, which women would not usually have been involved in, and also as an authoritative figure who can teach her son. Lisa Raphals explains this clearly, suggesting that “When Wenbo bows and accepts her teaching, he also presumably accepts her premises” (Raphals 2002, 278). Further, Ling had a say in the marriage of her son, and punished him for his incorrect following of rituals (Kinney 2014, 15). This clearly runs against the *yin-yang* gender distinction, as it shows a woman who has authority and knowledge of the government, thus displaying qualities typical of *yang.* It is also explained that when her son Wenbo died, Ling believed that if a man favoured the inner (women) then his concubines would die for him, but if he favoured the outer (his occupation), his ministers died for him. Ling feared that her son favoured the inner, so attempted to convince his concubines not to show their mourning too much. When hearing of this, Confucius said:

> A girl’s wisdom is not as great as a woman’s; a boy’s wisdom is not as great as a man’s. The wife of Gongfu lineage was indeed wise. She wished to add further lustre to her son’s good reputation. (Kinney 2014, 15)

This quote from Confucius is just as interesting as his statements in the *Analects.* It is clear that Confucius here is praising a woman. He is using the female, Ling, as an example to his students, who would have all been male. This shows that at least one woman was thought to be capable of understanding and following rituals, and serving her son well by trying to preserve his reputation. The message here is quite different from *Analects* 6.26 and 8.2, which present women as unable to follow ritual and not to be met with. It is however worth considering whether there are still negative aspects to the quote from Confucius, which may also have affected the representation of women. Firstly, neither Ling nor her son were mentioned in the *Analects.* As the *Analects* is thought to be the main text of Confucius' teachings, it is important to consider why Ling was not mentioned in it. This could reveal how important the followers of Confucius found this lesson about Ling, as it appears that it was not thought to be as crucial for teaching about women as the passages included in the *Analects* were. Secondly, Confucius did not mention Ling's name when talking about her, as she was only referred to as "the wife of Gongfu." This suggests that women were not represented as intellectual persons themselves, but instead were thought of in terms of their status with regard to men. This thought is supported just by the section titles in the *Lienu Zhuan*, which all reference "mothers" or "wives," and not just the women as their own persons.

Overall, the story of Ling Liang found in the *Lienu Zhuan* may give

women a more positive representation than the passages in the *Analects.* However, it is not mentioned in what is considered to be the most important text, the *Analects*, and it still refers to her as "Gongfu's wife," which may suggest that women were thought of in terms of their role in the household (such as "mother," "wife," "daughter") and not as their own people, as men would have been.

Overall, the three passages from the *Analects* (17.25, 8.2, and 6.26) represent women during the classical Confucian period to be "uncompliant," "resentful," tough and somewhat less than fully human beings that men had to handle. Passages 8.2 and 6.26 especially give the impression that women's roles were inferior to men's, belonging in the *yin*, "inner," and not taking part in *yang*, "outer," political affairs. Though these give the impression of a negative representation of women and their roles, the story of Ling Liang in the *Lienu Zhuan* shows the opposite because it quotes Confucius praising a woman and using her as an example. When considering this mention of a woman during the classical Confucian period, it may lead to the conclusion that though women were represented as beings who shouldn't take part in political, authoritative roles, they were still capable of doing so and would occasionally get praise for it too.

4 The *I Ching* and Women

The *I Ching* (*Yijing* 易經), translated into English as *The Book of Changes*, is one of the oldest sacred historical books of Confucian

philosophy. Along with the *Analects*, the *Book of Odes*, *Book of Rites* and *Book of Song*, it was sometimes thought to have been compiled by Confucius and his disciples, and was read by many to understand the Confucian teachings. Because the *I Ching* is believed to be the oldest of these books, we will consider some passages within it which help to give further understanding about the roles and representations of women during the classical Confucian period, and also compare the negative and positive representations displayed. We will also consider how these passages may compare to the *yin-yang* gender distinction discussed in section 2, above.

First, let's look at some passages from the *I Ching* which appear to give a generally negative impression of the roles and representations of women during this period. One such passage is as follows:

> During courtship the young man subordinates himself to the girl, but in marriage, which is represented as the coming together of the eldest son and the eldest daughter, the husband is the directing and moving force outside, while the wife, inside, is gentle and submissive. (Section 32)

This passage clearly demonstrates some of the qualities of *yin-yang* attributed to gender which we have previously discussed. For example, the use of the expression "gentle and submissive" for women as part of a marriage highlights the qualities associated with *yin.* This may demonstrate that women may not have had power, because they stayed

inside and were regarded as tender, passive and obedient housewives. It also demonstrates women being dutiful, “gentle and submissive,” whereas men are described as “directing.” The difference between the ideas of “directing” and “submissive” shows the opposing roles that men and women would have been given. This may be telling with how the gender and power hierarchy worked within marriage and at the home during this period, husbands being forceful and in control, whereas wives would be obedient to them. This wording also may suggest that roles involving the “outside” may have been considered to be superior to the roles involving the “inside,” as the husband is the one described as being in control.

These suggested roles are supported by further passages. For example:

> This is appropriate for a good housewife. It is not necessary for her to be conversant with the affairs of the world. But for a man who must take active part in public life, such a narrow, egotistic way of contemplating things is of course harmful. (Section 20)

This second passage sends a similar message regarding the representation of women, suggesting that women take part in “inner” and not “outer” roles. This is highlighted by the sentence “It is not necessary for her to be conversant in the affairs of the world.” The passage also appears to be instructing men to be careful with how they take part in public life, which is interesting because it is only instructing

men, and not women. Therefore, this passage supports the roles allotted to women by the previous passage, to suggest that women were not to take part in politics and a public, outside life, and to instead take a role in the "inside."

The third passage which I will discuss also supports this view:

> A woman should follow a man her whole life long, but a man should at all times hold to what he is doing at the given moment. Should he persistently seek to conform to the woman, it would be a mistake for him. Accordingly it is altogether right for a woman to hold conservatory to tradition, but a man must always be flexible and adaptable and allow himself to be guided solely by what his duty requires of him at the moment. (Section 32)

This passage conveys the impression that a woman's only duty was to follow and serve her husband, whereas men had more flexibility and did not need to keep themselves to their wives. This supports the previous passages to give the impression that women were submissive and destined to serve their husbands, whereas men had more freedom and power. It also goes a step further, though, in suggesting that a woman had a *fixed* role throughout her life, which was purely to serve a man, whereas men (some men, at least) had the choice and opportunity to adapt and change, without any mention of women. This

shows the power dynamic between men and women during this period and supports the *yin-yang* "inner" and "outer" gender distinctions.

Overall, these passages from the *I Ching* support those previously explored in the *Analects* and the gender distinctions given from the qualities of *yin* and *yang*. They suggest that women's roles during the classical Confucian period were "inside," working within the house and not taking part in any occupation on the "outside," particularly those concerning politics and government, because that would be the man/husband's role. They may also give an understanding of the representations of women during this period, especially with the terms "gentle" and "submissive" and the reference to "inside" roles demonstrate the *yin* qualities to suggest that women were represented to be inferior to men due to the more emotional roles given to them.

Though the previous passages have given a more generally negative representation of women in philosophy during the classical Confucian period, we will now consider some more positive passages which seem to hold women to appear more equal to men. The first passage which may suggest some more equal relation between the genders is as follows:

> However, as applied to human affairs, the principle of this complementary relationship is found in the relation between man and woman, but also in that between prince and minister and between father and son. (Section 2)

This passage offers a different explanation of what a woman's role would be during this period. It may suggest that it isn't just gender which has power relations, as it can apply to relationships other than husband and wife, such as "prince and minister" and "father and son." This could therefore change the perception of how women were represented during this period, as the hierarchy in marriage tends to show women to be inferior, when it may just be to do with the situation and not related to gender. This may also show that the *yin-yang* opposite qualities may apply to many different people and not just males and females exclusively. Raphals explains this, suggesting that there is a lack of correlation between "*yin-yang* and gender" (Raphals 1999, 140). For example, in a relationship between "father and son," the son may be the inferior *yin* because of the power relations between them. This is also suggested in Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women,* where she writes "Whenever the mother-in-law says, 'Do not do that,' and if what she says is right, unquestionably the daughter-in-law obeys" (Swan 1932, 88). Here, it is suggested that there can be similar *yin-yang* power dynamics with different relations, with the mother-in-law being superior to the daughter-in-law. This could therefore suggest that women were not represented to be so inferior, and it may be determined by the context of the situation.

It is, however, noteworthy that in the sacred texts, such as the *I Ching* discussed here, women never appear to be at the top of the hierarchy and only seem to be mentioned from their role of a wife, who seems to always be inferior to the husband. This could suggest

that despite the power relations applying to all types of relationship, women were always to be represented as inferior with the role of husband and wife.

The second passage which appears to have a more positive representation of women is:

Man and wife ought to work together like a pair of eyes. (Section 54)

This seems to suggest more equality between men and women than the other passages. This is because it speaks of men and women together, without making reference to their roles and differences, but instead considering them to be the same and working together. This is similar to the previous passage and its use of the term “complementary.” This is because the word “complementary” differs greatly from “submissive,” to demonstrate equality. This is also important because it would represent women to be the same as men and needed as much as men, just like a pair of eyes move together and both fulfil their duties of seeing. It is however still important to note that despite this appearing that women might be equal to men regarding their roles, it still allows for submissive women. This is because claiming that man and wife ought to work together, it does not specify their particular roles. Though a pair of eyes tend to do the same role, previous passages have demonstrated that women’s roles were the opposite of men’s. This could mean that although the men and women worked

together, and appeared “complementary,” they could be working together in separate roles to create balance. This would be similar to creating harmony with *yin-yang* having different duties, but the overall outcome is harmony. This may be important to consider because the text would have been written by men, who may have considered women taking on their inferior role whilst working with superior men as a complementary dynamic. Despite considering this, the passage tends to give the impression that women were in fact represented as equal to men, and that they could work together and not be complete opposites.

The final passage which we will consider tends to also suggest a complementary representation of men and women working together, but also highlights the differences discussed in the previous section:

> The foundation of the family is the relationship between husband and wife. The tie that holds the family together lies in the loyalty and perseverance of the wife. Her place is within, while that of the husband is without. (Section 36)

This passage clearly shows the dependence on women and their complementary relationship with their husband to create a foundation for the family. This could suggest that women were represented to be reliable and equal to men, as both men and women were needed to create what was needed for a good family. This could support the last

two passages discussed, because it is showing women in a positive light, as just as necessary as the man within the home.

The passage also pushes back to the more negative representation of women, displaying them to be “within.” This could link back to the associations of “gentle,” “submissive” and “inner,” showing that although a wife is just as necessary as a husband and their relationship appears complementary, the role of a wife is still vastly different to the role of a husband. This last passage appears to nicely tie up the two different representations of women given in the *I Ching*, by not only showing that the relationship between husband and wife is necessary, complementary and depended upon within the family, but also showing that the roles of women were the opposite to those of men and may been seen to be inferior to men.

Overall, these last three passages tend to represent women in a more positive light by offering examples of when men and women had an equal relationship and worked together. It also demonstrated that the *yin-yang* qualities associated with men and women may not be exclusive to just gender, and there may be situations where women are represented as above someone else with power. It must however be noted that this does not occur within the *I Ching*, as women are always inferior and only mentioned by their role of a wife, not as persons in themselves.

Overall, the *I Ching* can give some help with understanding the roles and representations of women during the classical Confucian period. Though it first appears that women were represented in a more

negative way, as inferior in a marriage setting and described to be "submissive," it may also be determined that there are situations where women may be regarded as equal to men, because their relationship is the "foundation" of a family. From the *I Ching*, we believe it can be taken away that the representation of women during this time period is generally negative, similar to that of the *Analects*, suggesting that women's roles were "inner" and not equal to men's, who had "outer" roles and could be involved in public affairs. Though the role of a wife is deemed important, it is the only role women appeared to be given compared to the large number of roles available to men, and they still always had to answer to men.

5 Women in the Works of the Post-Confucian Philosophers

Mentions of women in the works of Confucius are scarce enough that it is hard to argue that any general and substantive themes (as opposed to specific thoughts about women) emerge. But what happens in the works of the other major Chinese philosophers who overlap with, and then follow Confucius?

The thought of Mozi [470–c.391 BCE] is dominated by consequentialism, and this certainly governs his attitudes towards women. So, on the one hand, his remarks reflect his concern with the urgent need to increase the population of China (Ivanhoe & Van Norden 2005, 79), and not to waste resources on the supposedly lavish rites endorsed by Confucians (82). Here, he worries that women will be too busy mourning to be able to "rise at dawn and retire at night in

order to complete their work of spinning and weaving." Or, in another example, that they will be unable to undertake such work if "kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, [diverting] vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people" (106–7, 108–9). In this respect his utilitarian thinking, although applied even-handedly to women and to men, still speaks in favour of traditional gender-roles and practices, the latter being the "allotted tasks" he speaks of so often (108).

On the other hand, Mozi's consequentialism does give him a critical perspective on supposedly ancient practices such as those of the state of Kaishu, in which mothers were carried off to a distant place and abandoned when their husbands had died (88).

Mencius [372–289 BCE] seems to be the first major philosophical thinker explicitly to endorse the injunction towards kindness to family members given in the *Book of Odes* (Ivanhoe & Van Norden 2005, 124). He has no hesitation in also endorsing the idea that to regard obedience as fitting is "the Way of a wife or concubine" (134), of course. But his understanding of the ritual governing non-intimate physical contact between the hands of men and women is that it can and must be suspended in an emergency situation where a woman's life is at risk (138).

In Mencius, though, a potentially deeper theme which will be continued in later Confucian thinkers emerges. Discussing the ancient sage-king Shun 舜 (c. 2187–c. 2067 BCE), Mencius endorses the idea that "the relation of father and children is one of love, ruler and

minister is one of righteousness, husband and wife is one of distinction, elder and younger is one of precedence, and that between friends is one of trust" (134). The idea that the relation of husband and wife is one of "distinction," not further elaborated on here, will be so later in the *Ru*-ist tradition.

The date of the *Daodejing* (credited to *Laozi*) is uncertain; traditionally dated from the time of Confucius, it is now often thought to be as late as the 4th century BCE. Among the new (and, as far as we can tell, non-Confucian) ideas it introduces is that of the mother as origin, source, beginning or root. This idea occurs several times in the text, and becomes one of its most prominent themes:

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden 2005, 163)

The spirit of the valley never dies;
She is called the "Enigmatic Female."
The portal of the Enigmatic Female;
Is called the root of Heaven and earth. (165–66)

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.

Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.
I do not know its proper name;
I have given it the style “the Way.” (174–75)

Another such passage serves as a link to a second important theme:

When the portal of Heaven opens and closes, can you play the part of the feminine?
Comprehending all within the four directions, can you reside in nonaction? (167)

Here, the idea of the feminine as portal is clearly linked with the concept of *wu wei* 無爲, effortless action. Although that concept can certainly be found in Confucius, it assumes an increasing importance in works more inclined towards Daoism, like the *Daodejing* and the writings of Zhuangzi. In the former, the association of the female and *wu wei* assumes great significance, given the existing link between *wu wei* and the Way:

A great state is like the delta of a mighty river.
It is where the whole world gathers.
It is the female of the whole world.
The female always gets the better of the male through stillness.

> Through stillness, she places herself below the male.
> And so, a great state, by placing itself below a lesser state, can take the lesser state.
> A lesser state, by placing itself below a great state, can be taken by the greater state. (192–93)

These ideas of the Dao as feminine, of this feminine as the "mother" or origin of heaven and earth, and thus as more fundamental and more primordial than the masculine, are among the factors which distinguish the *Daodejing*'s treatment of the feminine from that of the Confucian tradition. So too is the strong and pervasive use of the water metaphor to illustrate not only *wu wei* but also the idea that it is a specifically feminine kind of energy (see, for example, Ma 2016, section IV). The markedly positive evaluation of supposedly negative features such as passivity, softness, and weakness, thought of by Daoist thinkers as ultimately destined to overcome their correlative and stereotypically masculine traits, is not in itself distinctive of Daoism. But the strength of the association of such features with the female marks a departure from the mainstream Confucian tradition.

Such ideas are associated, too, with different attitudes towards the question of *distinction*, or differentiation. Although the early Daoist thinkers rely on the contrast between *yin* and *yang*, the *Daodejing*, as Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden rightly say, "appeals to an earlier golden age in human history, before people made sharp distinctions among things" (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 162). The

Zhuangzi, too (compiled between the fifth and third centuries BCE), follows up this line of thought, suggesting that although our making distinctions is what sets us apart from animals, it is also the root of human problems.

Finally, though, and in strong contrast to Daoist thought, the fullest Confucian elaboration of the idea of "distinction" (promised above) occurs in the work of Xunzi, who explicitly raises the question "What is that by which humans are human?", and answers:

> I say: It is because they have distinctions. Desiring food when hungry, desiring warmth when cold, desiring rest when tired, liking the beneficial and hating the harmful—these are things people have from birth. These one does not have to await, but are already so. These are what Yu and Jie both share. […] Thus, that by which humans are human is not that they are special in having two legs and no feathers, but that they have distinctions. The birds and beasts have fathers and sons but not the intimate relationship of father and son. They have the male sex and the female sex but no differentiation between male and female. And so among human ways, none is without distinctions. Of distinctions, none are greater than social divisions, and of social divisions, none are greater than rituals, and of rituals, none are greater than those of the sage-kings. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 266)

Here at last we have what might be thought to be a conceptual

connection being forged between the idea of humanity, our use of "distinctions," and the rituals which were so important to the Confucian thinkers. Xunzi's identification serves to tie the idea of our essence or nature to the fact that we distinguish, rather than assimilating, females from males, with all the "distinctions" which this distinguishing implied at that time. Our human part in the cosmos is to bring order, and order depends on our making distinctions:

> I say, when Heaven and earth unite, then the myriad creatures are born. When *yin* and *yang* interact, then changes and transformations arise. When human nature and deliberate effort unite, then all under Heaven is ordered. For Heaven can give birth to creatures, but it cannot enforce distinctions among creatures. Earth can support people, but it cannot order people. In the world, the ten thousand things and human beings all must await the sage, and only then will they be appropriately divided up. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 281–82)

Xunzi, as Ivanhoe and Van Norden put it, thus "turns Zhuangzi's point on its head and glorifies such distinctions as the source of all good" (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 266, note 25). Following in the *Ru*-ist tradition, Xunzi then connects the idea of distinctions with the practice of naming, and thus with getting the names of things correct. He explains the contrast between what happens when names are not, and when they are, attached to the right things:

> When different forms make contact with the heart, they make each other understood as different things. If the names and their corresponding objects are tied together in a confused fashion, then the distinction between noble and base will not be clear, and the like and the unlike will not be differentiated. If this is so, then the problem of intentions not being understood will surely happen, and the disaster of affairs being thereby impeded and abandoned will surely occur. Thus, the wise person draws differences and establishes names in order to point out their corresponding objects. Most importantly, he makes clear the distinction between noble and base, and, at the least, he distinguishes the like and the unlike. When noble and base are clearly distinguished, and like and unlike are differentiated, then there will be no problem of intentions not being understood, and the disaster of affairs being thereby impeded and abandoned will not occur. This is the reason for having names…. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 293–94)

Here, Xunzi is drawing heavily on the *Ru*-ist doctrine of "the rectification of names." Since the names in question will include gender-distinctions, those distinctions can be smuggled in under the cover of the Confucian tradition. The contrast here with the proto-Daoist thinkers, who purport to reject, or at least be suspicious of, distinctions, should be clear.

These issues of correct names and distinctions also intersect with another central theme of Xunzi's thinking, his evaluation of human

nature. Arguing against Mengzi's more positive evaluation of human nature, Xunzi tells us that "For any discourse, one values it if things conform to its distinctions, and if it matches the test of experience" (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 303). Making his own case that ritual and standards of righteousness cannot possibly belong to people's nature, Xunzi says:

> Heaven does not favor the people of Qi and Lu and exclude the people of Qin. Then why is it that with regard to the standards of righteousness for father and son, and the proper distinction between husband and wife, they [the people of Qin] are not as good at filial reverence and respectful good form as those of Qi and Lu? It is because the people of Qin follow along with their inborn dispositions and nature, take comfort in utter lack of restraint, and are lax in regard to ritual and the standards of righteousness. How could it be because their natures are different? (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 304).

For Xunzi, human nature is constant, universal, and unimpressive. What sets us above the beasts, and gives us our proper place in the cosmos, are the deliberate efforts we make, efforts embodied particularly in what beasts can never aspire to, the correct use of names and the distinctions they incorporate.

6 Conclusion

The main texts discussed here, the *Analects, Lienu Zhuan, I Ching* and those of the early post-Confucian philosophers, together give us an understanding of the roles and representations of women in classical Chinese philosophy.

The introduction of *yin-yang* gender distinctions into Confucian philosophy by Dong Zhongshu clearly demonstrates how the gender roles at the time could be reinforced by the assigned qualities of *yin* and *yang.* Certain qualities associated with *yin* (nurturing, yet also jealousy and bitterness) supported women's assigned domestic roles. This was also shown in the three passages from the *Analects.* In *Analects* 17.25, we find women were represented as difficult and "resentful." In *Analects* 8.2 and 6.26 women are represented as unsuitable for the realm of politics, the "outer." It is noteworthy, however, that the story of Ling Liang from the *Lienu Zhuan* suggests that although women being involved in "outer" affairs was looked down on, there were still women who would be and who would occasionally get praised for doing so.

The portrayal of women in the *I Ching* is very similar to that of the *Analects.* Here, terms such as "submissive" and "gentle" were used to describe women and their roles as wives, representing women as passive. This also demonstrates *yin* qualities, to show that the roles of women during classical Confucianism were reinforced by the *yin-yang* gender distinctions. Though there is a mention of a "complementary" relationship in the *I Ching*, the roles given to women were still very different to those for men, and women did not hold the same power,

which implies that women were represented as inferior to men. Lastly, when considering post-Confucian thinkers, women also appear to be only referred to in their roles of a wife or mother, and not as people in themselves. Further, the term "distinction" is explored when looking at the relationship between men and women. This could demonstrate that women may not have continued to be viewed as inferior, but instead as different to men because of their distinctions.

We have seen that the roles of women during the classical period of Chinese philosophy tended to be as part of the "inner," working domestically as a housewife and mother. Women were represented as submissive and passive, as with the qualities ascribed to *yin* energy, and therefore as inferior to men. Despite representations of women in philosophy being so during this time, there were exceptions, specific women who could take a male "outer" political role, but would be looked down on for doing so. This shows that it was realised, explicitly or otherwise, that women were capable of taking those roles, but also that they were not allowed to take such roles at that time.

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