

# Women in Chinese Philosophy: *Yin-Yang* Theory in Feminism Constructing<sup>\*</sup>

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The traditional way of thinking about women in ancient Chinese philosophy was grounded on the concepts of *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* and *Yang* are the basic principles of the being, the interrelation and interaction between which provide the original force for the emergence of all beings in the world. In the traditional family construction, men as *Yang* master the affairs outside the family, and women as *Yin* master the affairs inside the family (男主外, 女主内), which means that women normally had no voice in the social affairs. Her field was limited inside the family. Furthermore, according to Confucian doctrine “husband guides wife” (夫为妻纲), husband is the decision maker of a family, as a king in a state. The prejudice against woman has persisted to the present. This paper will show that within the Confucian tradition, the ontological principles of *Yin* and *Yang* have been abused to a certain degree, and women became the sacrifice of the interpretation with this prejudice. The author will argue in this paper, that the *Yin-yang* principle itself is very flexible. It contains much richer possibilities of interpretation than that had been interpreted in the Confucian tradition. The author’s argument is that if we recognized that each person is a complete *Yin-Yang* system, we would understand that every human being is a complete and independent person with both virtues of *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* is not a substance which restricts women, neither *Yang* to men. From this perspective, every woman has the potentiality to reach her universality and individuality. The author’s claim is that in building feminism with the resource of ancient Chinese thought, the concepts of *Yin* and *Yang* can be revived and given a new life if we think about them in a functional way. In this framework, *Yin* and *Yang* are correlative functions in social and family operation. The properties of *Yin* and *Yang* are determined only in each particular affair. People practicing functions are *Yin* or *Yang* in temporality.

*Keywords:* *Yin-Yang*, women, China, function

## ***Yin-Yang* and Male-Female: The Abused Ontological Principle**

The main way of thinking about women in ancient Chinese philosophy was grounded on the concepts of *Yin* and *Yang*. In *I Ching* (易经), it is said, “one *Yin* and one *Yang* are called *Tao*” (一阴一阳之谓道). Confucius had elaborately studied *I Ching*.<sup>1</sup> It is believed that he wrote the interpretative part of *I Ching*—*I*

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<sup>1</sup> In *Shi Ji* (*The Records of the Grand Historian*) by Sima Qian, it is said, that Confucius studied *I Ching* so hard, that the leather bind of the book had been fractured several times (韦编三绝). In *Analects of Confucius*, Confucius sighed, “If I have fifty years to study the book of Changes, then perhaps I, too, can avoid any great errors” (子曰: 加我数年, 五十以学易, 可以无大过矣). *The Analects of Confucius* 7.16, translated by Burton Watson (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2007): 50.

*Zhuan*, which later is composed in *The Book of Change (I Ching)*. His philosophy was deeply influenced by the changing theory in *I Ching*. According to the theory of *Yin-Yang*, the basic principles of the world are *Yin* and *Yang*, and the interrelation and interact to each other of *Yin* and *Yang* provide the original force of emergence of all beings in the world. As it is described in *Huai-nan-tzu (淮南子)*—a book written by Liu An (BC 179-BC 122) and his followers, *Yin* and *Yang* are the principles of cosmos in the early Chinese cosmology:

The superimposed quintessences of Heaven and Earth became the *Yang* and *Yin*, the concentrating quintessences of *Yin* and *Yang* became the Four Seasons, the scattering quintessences of the Four Seasons became the myriad creatures (天地之袭精为阴阳，阴阳之专精为四时，四时之散精为万物). (Graham, 1986, pp. 29, 30)

With regard to the property of *Yin* or *Yang*, everything in cosmos is no single, but always has an opposite. The beings in the world can be separated by their property of *Yin* and *Yang*. As Graham's chart shows (pp. 27, 28):

A Yang	B Yin
1 Heaven	Earth
2 Spring	Autumn
3 Summer	Winter
4 Day	Night
...	
9 Ruler	Minister
10 Above	Below
11 Man	Woman
...	

In this duality, *Yang* is the part of strength, power, and outgoing, while *Yin* is the part of quietness, gentleness, passiveness, and suffering. In ethics, this duality represents two kinds of different but equally important characters: keeping forgoing and humility.

The thought of dividing the beings into opposite groups can also be found in ancient Western philosophy, as by Pythagoras or Heraclitus and other traditions, in which the opposition and struggle between the opposite sides are endowed with most important significance. But in ancient China, the relationship between the opposite duality is mainly complementary, while “the West as conflicting”, as Graham pointed out (p. 28). As Graham rightly claimed, the opposites in the above chart are mutually dependent, and are not corresponding to “good-evil” opposite (p. 28).

The concept of *Yin* and *Yang* was also broadly used in traditional Chinese medicine, architecture, arts, politics, and other fields.<sup>2</sup> But when this scheme of principles was applied to human being and many traditional Confucian ethical dogmatics are developed from it, things became not so optimistic for women. It is said that *Yin* represents the character of women, and *Yang* represents the character of men. In the relationship of men and women, women should be passive, suffering, and weak. It follows that the traditional Chinese family construction is, the men master the affairs outside the family, and the women master the affairs inside the family (男主外，女主内). The couple has certain interdependent and cooperating relation rather than that men

<sup>2</sup> In chapter 5 of ancient Chinese medical book *Huangdi Neijing*, it is said, “*Yinyang* constitutes the *dao* of Heaven and Earth; it embraces *wanwu* within its order and its laws; it is the source of all changes as well as the very foundation of life and growth; it is where the spirit dwells. The physician, in order to heal the sick, must always cut to the root of the illness in terms of *Yinyang* and restore its balance in the individual” (《黄帝内经·素问·阴阳应象大论》：“阴阳者，天地之道也，万物之纲纪，变化之父母，生杀之本始，神明之府也，治病必求于本” ). Trans. by Keekok Lee, in: *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical Chinese Medicine-Philosophy, Methodology, Science* (Lanham. Boulder. New York. London: Lexington Books, 2017): xi.

is the master of women. But the situation also meant that the women normally had no voice in the social affairs. Her field is limited inside the family. Furthermore, according to Confucian doctrine, “husband guides wife” (夫为妻纲), husband is the decision maker of a family, as a king in a state. The notorious ugly custom of foot binding was related to this doctrine: to confine the women within home and prevent them to elope. It was said that Zhu Xi, a famous Confucian scholar of Song Dynasty 800 years ago, once legitimated binding feet when was the magistrate of Zhang Zhou.<sup>3</sup> Luckily this evil custom is forbidden officially in the middle of last century. But the deeply rooted prejudice according to the position and sphere of activity of women is hard to eradicate. In ancient China, there were only a few exceptions that some women broke the limitation of family. The courtesans, who were visited by scholars and officials, hosted the cultural and social elites at home which was the important social places of the upper-class men. These ladies developed rather remarkable artistic accomplishments. Their poems and paintings were celebrated and collected by literati. There were also several famous Buddhist nuns which enjoyed high reputation in Chinese religious and philosophical history. But the women who had the chance to take part in the public life were only few exceptions in ancient China, and usual they had bad reputation among the women of good family. Most women were restricted in inner courts. And the women in upper class were more strictly confined by Confucian virtues which were set specially for women.

But in my opinion, in the traditional moral doctrines, the ontological principles of *Yin* and *Yang* were abused to a certain degree, and the women became the sacrifice of the interpretation with prejudice. The principles are actually very flexible in themselves. The original theory of *Yin-Yang* contains much richer possibilities of interpretation than that in the Confucian tradition. In principle *Yin-Yang* is not stationary. They are not only contrary to each other, but also attractive to each other, even transferable to each other. It is most important to keep the harmony between *Yin* and *Yang*. If there is too much *Yin* or too much *Yang*, the imbalance will lead to catastrophe, i.e., natural disasters, wars, disease, etc. It is very proper to say that neither pole is superior to the other, and the harmony of both sides make growth, harvest, peace, and happiness. The two poles of *Yin* and *Yang* are not the duality of dualism in Western philosophy. The harmony of *Yin* and *Yang* is not based on the oppression of one side, so the harmony of the society and family should not depend on the oppression of any part on the other.

The equality of the duality of *Yin* and *Yang* in ontology means that women and men are essentially equally important in principle. It does not necessarily lead to the thought of “men’s superiority to women” (男尊女卑) as in traditional Confucian doctrine described. In fact, in the field of human being, although it is usually to be said, that *Yin* is female and *Yang* is male, but actually man is not equal to *Yang*, neither woman is equal to *Yin*. It is also said by Zhu Xi that “*Tai Chi* is just a best principle. Everybody has a *Tai Chi*, everything has a *Tai-Chi*” (太极只是个极好至善底道理。人人有一太极，物物有一太极) (1986, p. 2371). *Tai Chi* is composed of *Yin* and *Yang*. It means that women are not only *Yin*, men are not only *Yang* simply, but everybody has his/her own whole principle of *Yin-Yang*. Everybody, no matter man or woman, has the potentiality to reach the full *Tai Chi* and become a complete human being. It can even be said that the genders do not determine the property of *Yin* or *Yang* of a human being, but conversely, *Yin* and *Yang* belong to the superior level, which decides what potentiality one has.

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<sup>3</sup> It is collected in “The Walking Sticks Woods of Zhang Zhou Women,” in: *Local Customs in China*, edited by Hu Puan (Shanghai: Guangyi Publishing House, 1923) (胡朴安编著, “漳州女子之杖林”, 《中华全国风俗志》, 上海广益书局, 1923).

Although the position of women has developed significantly along with the withdrawn of Confucianism from the dominant ideology, the oppressive situation of women in society still lasts explicitly or implicitly. And the traditional interpretation of theory of *Yin-Yang* still has profound effect on the idea about women in modern China. When it comes to employment, promotion, and public right of discourse, women are ignored consciously or unconsciously. Even in the family relation, there are still some public intelligent insists that women should keep their *Yin* character, and be suffering and not too aggressive, so that to keep the harmony of the family and the mental health of the children. It is not the problem of discarding the thought of *Yin-Yang*. It is about how women can live as human being and as women in China.

### **Only Confucianism Can Settle the Modern Women?**

From the last century, women in China gradually became liberated from family. In the narratives of the enlightenment of China from “the May 4th” Movement of 1919, there were so called three mountains pressing on the traditional women: the power of husband, the power of clan, and the power of religion. But this narrative was produced by analogy to the Western culture. In Confucian doctrine, it is said that the women should “be obedient to her father when unmarried, to her husband after married, to her son when widowed” (在家从父, 出嫁从夫, 夫死从子). After 1949 the liberation of women speeded up rapidly. The official slogan is “Women can hold up half sky”. That means, the women are equal to the men and affect half of the social function. When Julia Kristeva, the French feminist and psychoanalyst visited China with Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, etc., in April-May 1974, she found that the status of women in China were even better than in France (1977). When she was interviewed in 2013, she pointed out, in China in the process of self-liberation, the aspect of masculine of women has been developed too rapidly, while the aspect of feminine of women was ignored or suppressed, so that the women in modern China are mostly full of reason, independence, self-consciousness, and controlling force, but lack of maternity, concern of others (Wang, 2013). This is also a kind of imbalance of *Yin* and *Yang*.

Kristeva’ observation and analysis is right in general. The status of women has indeed elevated in many aspects. This process accompanied with the development of industrialization and the destruction of traditional self-sufficiency of small-scale peasant economy in China. In his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels stated, that the modern large-scale industry emancipated the women from house to the labour market and the factory. When women are equally the bread-winner of the family as men, women and men become equal sexes (2004, p. 78). In China, the sex equality has been developed significantly with the industrialization and the agricultural collective labour. But as Beauvoir pointed out that Engels reduced the problem of woman to “the problem of her capacity for labour”, gender inequality in China is not eliminated with the development of economy. There are new problems appearing along with the old ones. Beauvoir criticized Engels and the historical materialism to have ignored important elements of women’s life: sex and gestation, which is not simply equal to a task or a piece of work (1953, p. 80ff). In the past stage of liberation of women in China, the problem Beauvoir raised has been ignored. The property of sex and gestation of women became a reason that women are exploited.

In fact, there are still many problems hiding in the shadow of the emancipation of Chinese women in the modern time. For example, the discrimination in employment. A boy has much higher chance of employment, just because he is a boy. Men generally also have more opportunities to get promotion. When the best universities admit a greater rate of girls than boys, when the women achieve more success in a field, a kind of comment mixed derision with anxiety would appear: An excess of *Yin* leads to deficiency of *Yang* (阴盛阳衰) (Lü, 2013).

Some of the problems come from the powerful remnants of the traditional ideas about women. Others were produced by the confusion about the identification of women or even human being. And the later source also encourages the former problems. The understanding about women and the women's self-understanding are changing in recent years. While many people, especially some feminists, are trying hard to promote the further liberation of women materially and spiritually, some other people, including some public intelligentsia, insist "only Confucianism can settle the modern women" (Jiang, 2015). The leading scholar who announces this view is one of the most famous contemporary Neo-Confucianists in mainland China, Jiang Qing.<sup>4</sup> He devotes himself to revive Confucianism. In his opinion, the once popular traditions in ancient China like binding feet, polygamy, did not originate directly from Confucian thoughts. They were just ancient folk customs. Confucians at most didn't refuse these customs and used them sometimes. In his opinion, in the period of Chinese modern Enlightenment at the beginning of 20th century, when the ancient Confucianized China encountered the western modern thoughts, the advocates of the modern thoughts attributed all evils of the society to Confucianism, so that to make an image of "human-eating" Confucian. He claimed, in a Confucian society, even the custom of concubinage, which was allowed by the Confucian, is much better than keeping mistresses in the modern time. For a concubine had her respective legal status in a family, she could live with dignity. According to Jiang Qing, the status of women in traditional society had no necessary relation with the Confucian theory. Some conditions came from social convention, but not Confucian. The ethical doctrine of Confucian intended to arrange the life of women justly and reasonably according to their female natural and social properties. In his opinion, the natural and social properties of a woman according to Confucianist thought consist in their belonging to family: as good daughter, good mother, good wife. Her achievement should not depend on her success in career or in public life, but on the fulfillment of her family responsibility only.

Jiang Qing's opinion is a long lasting traditional Confucian view about the position of women. The view had been widely criticized in the movement of enlightenment of China from the beginning of 20th century. But it comes back publicly after a century. Jiang Qing unreservedly supports the Confucian doctrine, like "husband guides wife" (夫为妻纲). For him, it means that although the wife managed the domestic affairs, but the dominant of the family is husband, never considering if the husband is an unwise and unreliable person. He invented the natural and social properties of women, which make it natural for him to announce that the field of women is family. His way of reviving the Confucian ethics makes the *Yin-Yang* principle of Confucian ethics rigid and banal, for it seems like that he forces modern Chinese women to wear the tiny shoes which belonged to the binding feet. He intentionally misinterpreted the Confucian doctrine "prudent reserve between men and women" (男女有别) as "difference between men and women", and explained the difference as difference in nature. It is clear what he means by nature is the famine nature of gender, which to him determines "the meaning of life" and "value" of women. For him and many other contemporary Confucianists, returning home is the best way for modern women.

### ***Yin and Yang Principles as Functions***

It is said in *Zhuangzi*, that *I Ching (The Book of Change)* is talking about *Yin-Yang* (《庄子·天下篇》：易

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<sup>4</sup> Jiang Qing is not the only one of the Neo-Confucianists who advocate "men's superiority to women" (男尊女卑). There are also other scholars like Tang Wenming, Zeng Yi, etc., who have been well educated by the modern culture and are famous professors in the best universities of China. They proclaim such ideas with severe prejudice to woman.

以道阴阳).<sup>5</sup> That means that the changes described in *I Ching* are the changes of *Yin-Yang*. Wilhelm summarized that the *I* (change) in *I Ching* has three meanings: The changes are the easy, the changing, and the constant (1988, p. 23). It is easy, because it is simple and naturally given, but not “something dark and mysterious”. It “happens to everybody every day, and what is simple and easy to understand”. Wilhelm insisted that change “is an inner tendency according to which development takes place naturally and spontaneously” (1988, pp. 24, 25, 27). The phenomena originated by the changes of *Yin-Yang* are constantly changing. No particular being in its essence is absolute *Yin* or absolute *Yang*. The properties of *Yin* and *Yang* of individual things are changing in relation to different situations. Not only that, the principles of *Yin-Yang* themselves are also mobile and flowing. They are related to each other and interdependent to each other because they are not two separated opposites. They each have their own properties, which are opposites. But *Yin* and *Yang* are constantly flowing to each other, in which process, one is increasing and the other reducing. There is a dot of its opposite in the area of *Yin* and *Yang* of the *Yin-Yang* Diagram. The dot is the origin where the *Yang* changes to *Yin*, and the *Yin* changes to *Yang*. Robin R. Wang pointed out this character of “mutual inclusion” (*Huhan* 互含) as one of the most important property of *Yin-Yang*. Her example of the exchange of Four Seasons is clear enough to explain this changing process:

Summer is the most *Yang* of the seasons, yet it contains a *Yin* force, which will begin to emerge in the summer, extend through the fall, and reach its culmination in the winter. Winter is the highest stage of *Yin*, yet it unfolds a *Yang* force that will attain its own full swing through spring to summer. (2013, p. 218)

This process is also a reversal one, as Robin Wang has pointed out (2013, p. 219). When *Yang* reaches its extreme, the *Yin* included in it begins to increase, until *Yin* reaches the extreme. It is described in *I Ching* that “out of the depth of *misfortune* comes the bliss (否极泰来) (1967, pp. 25, 27)”.<sup>6</sup>

If we recognize that each person is a complete *Yin-Yang* system, we would understand that each one of the human beings is an independent person. Each one has the potentiality to reach his/her completeness in universality and individuality. In principle, neither women nor men are determined by their physical or physiological gender to stay at home or work out and play a role in public life. Even in Zhu Xi’s philosophy, the human nature is divided into the nature of the physical endowment (*Qizhi zhi xing*) and the nature of the Heavenly Mandate (*Tianming zhi xing*). The latter is the original nature and the principle of the physical endowment (Chen, 2004, pp. 75-98). The original nature of every human being is equally pure and good. The purpose of cultivation is returning to it. As Mencius said, “Benevolence is man’s mind, and righteousness is man’s path”, “When men’s fowls and dogs are lost, they know to seek for them again, but they lose their mind, and do not know to seek for it. The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind” (1960, p. 414). To be a complete human being with full virtues is a potency of both man and woman, and the task of learning. Each side of *Yang* and *Yin* of each person nourishes the other and is complementary to each other. Human being—no matter man or woman, should firstly try to be a complete human. It is of course not a natural process, but by education and self-accomplishment. As Mencius described: “I am skillful in nourishing my great spirit...it fills up all between heaven and earth (我善养吾浩然之气.....塞于天地之间)” (Legge, 1960, p.

<sup>5</sup> *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-tzu*), chapter 33.

<sup>6</sup> The proverb comes from *I Ching*, the hexagram *P’i* means “The great departs; the small approaches” (《易·否》：“大往小来”) and *T’ai* means “The small departs, the great approaches. Good fortune. Success” (《易·泰》：“泰，小往大来，吉亨”). *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, translated by Richard Wilhelm, rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, 1st ed., 1950): 25, 27.

189).<sup>7</sup> Women as individuals are not simply *Yin* in themselves. More achievement of women does not mean the excess of *Yin* over *Yang*, nor does it lead to the imbalance of the social structure.

In constructing feminism, the concepts of *Yin* and *Yang* can be revived in new life if we think about them thoroughly in a functional way and ignore the traditional prejudice against woman. *Yin* and *Yang* are correlative functions, in which *Yang* plays the positive role and *Yin* plays the negative role. The properties of *Yin* and *Yang* of each thing or individual are contingently determined only in each particular affair. People who practice functions of *Yin* or *Yang* get the character of *Yin* or *Yang*. But *Yin* and *Yang* are events in temporality. *Yin* is not a substance or nature which restricts women, neither *Yang* to men. A human, no matter man or woman, can be *Yin*, as well as *Yang*. Even he/she can be *Yin* and *Yang* at the same time in relation to its contexts. In traditional Chinese medicine the functional interpretation of *Yin* and *Yang* is the theoretical basis for diagnosis and treatment. *Yin* and *Yang* are different and interrelated functions. Each organ of the human body is classified as *Yin* or *Yang* according to its role. Furthermore, each organ as *Yin* or *Yang* is subdivided into *Yin* and *Yang* according to the different roles it plays. From this aspect, different functions that an individual are carrying out temporarily endow her/him the property of *Yin* or *Yang*. Following and harmonizing with ones corresponding virtue of *Yin* or *Yang* lead to a state of balance and success. According to the mutual inclusive and interconvertible property of the principles of *Yin and Yang*, the social and family functions which can be divided with *Yin* and *Yang* belong not exclusively to women or men. For example, it is not only men who are the decision makers and dominants in a family. Cooperation and support to each other on the ground of equality lead to harmony and balance of society and family most possibly. And only on this ground, the idea of women in their relationship to men and to all the other social elements is to be discussed. People in society are interdependent to each other, so it is between women and men. In a nuclear family of modern time, the corporate and interdependent relationship of the family members grounds not on the natural genders. The so called natural property of women may lead to exploitation we have been very familiar with. Their interdependent relationship should be a flexible and interchangeable one.

The advantage of this functional interpretation of *Yin-Yang* in constructing feminism is that it can reasonably avoid the traditional prejudice to woman and keep the essence of the *Yin-Yang* theory. The main functions of individuals, including sex and gestation that Beauvoir cares a lot, could not be ignored and would be considered in a correlative and harmonious way.

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<sup>7</sup> 《孟子·公孙丑上》 (*Mencius: Gong Sun Chou I*). Legge's translation is "I am skillful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature," in: *The Chinese Classics: The Works of Mencius*: 189.

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