
CAN A WOMAN BE A JUNZI?

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE COVID CRISIS

女性能成为君子吗？
新冠疫情危机中的妇女领导力

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ABSTRACT

As Confucian teaching becomes more widely known in almost every corner of the world, accompanying the development of China's economic and cultural influence through the Belt-and-Road (BRI) projects, the *Junzi* ideal is becoming more attractive as the preferred leadership style for new generations of businesspeople. However, the *Junzi* ideal tends to be stereotyped as a man acting within a supposedly male-dominant world. At the same time, Confucius has been criticized for his alleged sexism, assuming without much comment women's subordination to men, as wives, mothers, and daughters, roles other than leaders.

This case study starts with reports of women leaders' early success responding to the Covid-19 crisis, compared to their male counterparts, which raise the question whether women's leadership embodies the values enshrined in the Confucian ideal of the *Junzi*. Considering the evidence of both history and current experience, the case study is meant to explore the question whether the *Junzi* as conceived in Confucian teaching should be clarified, in order to demonstrate its openness to development for both women and men, and not just in China. Key words: Covid-19 crisis and Chinese response, women in leadership, *Junzi*, challenging sexism in Confucian teaching.

Seeing

When China's struggle against Covid-19 first broke out in Wuhan, women made up 70% of the frontline health workers and 90% of the nurses. In March 2022, during the latest Covid surge in Shenzhen, the southern metropolitan city of China, women volunteered as social workers, nucleic acid test sample-takers, and threw themselves into the battle fighting the highly contagious virus, using their lives to guard the lives of others. A survey conducted by Liverpool scholars, namely *Leading in the Pandemic: Does Gender Really Matter?* (Garikipati and Kambhampati, 2021) confirms that there are significant differences when it comes to women and men in leadership fighting Covid-19. Their findings show that 1) Women are more sensitive to risk and regard human lives instead of economic gain as top priority in their management strategies. 2) Women are more likely to develop flat, diversified and democratic structures which place more emphasis on transparent and clear communication, empathy and interpersonal relationships. These facilitate listening to different voices, consensus decision-making and effective and responsible administration. 3) Women in leadership are more adept at managing crises than men, where they showed more resilience. The report concluded that empathy, resilience and interpersonal skills are what may be demanded more in future leaders.

However, the success achieved by women in responding to Covid-19 has not changed the mentality of most people's view of gender in leadership. According to a survey in the G7 countries, only half of those surveyed said they felt comfortable with women as country heads. (Batha, 2020) The concern is echoed by World Health Organization (WHO) statistics which state that only 35% of the leadership roles are filled by women globally, of which 35% are decision-

makers in fighting the pandemic, while the rest of decision-makers are men. This suggests that women's needs, and concerns are easily ignored or neglected during the planning, execution and delivery of health care and relevant products.

Considering the contrast between the contributions of women and the dismal picture of how they were portrayed in Chinese news media, isn't it time for us to ask whether we need to update our thinking about women's leadership? Are there obstacles in Chinese tradition that prevent us from understanding the role of women in public life?

One example is the sanitary pads shortage which hit China at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. The cause was not a shortage of the product itself, but a man-made problem created by male decision-makers who deemed sanitary pads not of immediate urgency compared to other PPEs, like masks, goggles, gowns etc. If the decision-makers were women, they would have understood the discomfort of frontline health workers, who when having their menstrual periods would be soaked in blood and urine, forced to make do with one pad the whole day long. (Shi, 2021).

"Women in the Media Report of Covid-19: Content Analysis of 23 Chinese Media's Report" conducted by Peking University, indicated that only 1.8% of the reports were unbiased, showing women's resilience and solidarity fighting the pandemic. Only this minority analyzed women's dilemmas from the perspective of sexual equality

and women's rights and offered criticism of the patriarchal culture that is indifferent to them. On women's visibility, as reported in the survey, there is big difference in various media. Some stories featured outstanding health workers and Covid-19 patients; however, the attention women received in general was far less than the impact they were having in the struggle against Covid.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic initially seemed contained in China, media reports on Covid-19 were largely reduced, thus dimming the spotlight cast on women. Most of the stories mentioning women's heroic deeds were consistent with praising the values of collectivism and professionalism, as well as calling for the participation of all walks of life in combating the pandemic. However, women seldom got depicted in their professional roles as government officers, experts and scholars, or social workers who were influential in decision making and policy execution. Instead, the stories prevalent in the reports reinforced traditional images of women as mothers, wives and daughters (Peking University, 2022).

A telling example is the controversial TV drama broadcast on Chinese national CCTV in a eulogy for the health workers. The drama was criticized harshly by netizens for its patriarchal perspectives where women were seen in supportive roles to their male counterparts. Although there was a female scientist in a role where she was a leader, the drama showed nothing of her professionalism, and tended to ignore the reality of mainly women health care workers who volunteered in fighting Covid-19 and executed leading responsibilities in hospitals, as well as in the research and development of vaccines.

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Are there obstacles in Chinese tradition that prevent us from understanding the role of women in public life? After all, Chairman Mao famously said that women hold up half the sky. But how are we to show proper regard for their service, given the models of leadership inherited from Chinese tradition? A good place to begin such a reassessment is to focus on the picture of women in Confucian tradition. Can women become *Junzi*? Is the current interest in *Junzi* leadership open equally to men and women's contributions?

Judging

What is *Junzi*? Can women become *Junzi*?

Confucian tradition commends the *Junzi* as the embodiment of human benevolence and righteousness. It is an ideal possessing the following four characteristics: "In his conduct of himself, he was humble; in serving his superiors, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just" (Analects, 5:16). Kind, just, respectful and humble, seem perfectly expressed in the traditional roles assigned to women as mothers, wives and daughters. Women should be humble in supporting their husbands and restrain themselves from taking the top hand even in social gatherings. In fact, women may often be too humble in declining leadership roles when they deserve them. Women should be just and kind when they are dealing with interpersonal relations; they should tend to avoid tension, conflicts, unfairness and misunderstandings. They are empathetic and respectful of others because of their nurturing natures. Their general caring and sense of fairness seems built in, a gift of evolution. But can we go a step further, and identify these images with contemporary experience of women's leadership? The question, then, might be asked, do women fit the *Junzi* ideal just as well or even more naturally than men?

According to Confucius, in exercising *Junzi* leadership, one should start with the family, expanding outward to one's business or profession, whether for-profit or non-profit, whether in the agencies of government or social services. Certainly, women in the critical role caring for the family initially embody the model for *Junzi* leadership. But traditionally, their role has been restricted by traditional assumptions regarding the differences between the worlds of men and women, the boundaries of *Wai* and *Nei*. Traditionally, respectable women were confined to the inner (*Nei*) household and its responsibilities (Ebrey, 1993). Ideally, even within the traditional household, women practice the virtues of righteousness, benevolence, wisdom, propriety, and sincerity in bringing up the children, where the children are taught right manners, to grow up into decent people of wisdom, justice, and trustworthiness. Indeed, even nowadays most mothers strive to do so. So far so good!

Throughout the Confucian classics, one way to recognize the *Junzi* is in comparison with the small-minded person (*Xiaoren*, 小人). Here are two examples:

In answering the question "Can a woman be a *Junzi*," we revisited some of Confucius' teachings and the *Four Books of Women (Nü Sishu)* and concluded that there should be no barriers to women realizing themselves as *Junzi*. Our findings are consistent with contemporary research on how women have contributed to the struggle against the Covid pandemic.

The Master said: "The mind of Junzi is conversant with righteousness; the mind of Xiaoren is conversant with gain. (Analects, 4:16)

Therefore, Junzi must be concerned about his/her own virtue first... Thus, virtue is the "root" and wealth is the "branches." If you put the roots outside and the branches inside, you will struggle against your people, and make them grab for anything they can. If you gather the wealth, you will scatter the people. If you scatter the wealth, you will gather the people. (Great Learning, 13)

Applied to the experiences of women fighting Covid-19, while both women and men are sensitive to risk, women are risk-averting when faced with the loss of human lives, while men tend to focus on the economic losses resulting from lockdowns and social distancing. Doesn't women's leadership in the Covid crisis give us a useful example of a *Junzi*'s priority of virtue over gain? It seems women have been more effective in carrying out the Confucius teaching on virtue as root and wealth as the branches: in special times like the Covid crisis, they have demonstrated the priority of caring for the people, over economic growth.

But what in fact did Confucius say about women? Is Confucian teaching truly sexist?

The most controversial Confucian teaching is from the *Analects*: "The Master said, 'Of all people, girls (*Nvzi*) and servants (*Xiaoren*) are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve towards them, they are discontented.'" (*Analects*, 17:25) However, in translating such sayings, people may not be getting Confucius' real intention in using *Nvzi* (女子) for "girls." The point seems specific to women working in lowly positions in Chinese households, and was not meant as an observation about women in general. (Kinney,

2017). Wouldn't this be a more reasonable way to interpret Confucius' teaching here? Since Confucius' core teaching is benevolence toward all people, wouldn't it be contradictory to assume that Confucius is sexist, intending to disparage all women? It would be contrary to his teaching regarding the equality between men and women, as for example, in the *Doctrine of Mean*:

The Way of the Noble Man functions everywhere yet is inconspicuous. Average men and women, even if ignorant, know something of it; yet even the sage cannot know it completely. Average men and women, even though lacking in ability are able to practice it to some extent; yet even the sage cannot practice it perfectly. The Way of the Noble Man starts with the common people, but in its absoluteness, it is observed throughout the universe (The Doctrine of Mean, 11).

Here Confucius clearly asserts that the *Junzi's* way can be learned and practiced by both men and women, and thus both, in theory at least, could become *Junzi*. This provides an opening for further development in Confucian tradition; nevertheless, it remains true that Confucian tradition generally has ignored this possibility, and accepted conventional, inherited norms which severely restricted the opportunities for women's leadership.

Are there Women *Junzi* throughout Chinese history? How did Chinese women view women's leadership?

Given Confucius' emphasis on self-cultivation and education for both men and women, one Confucian female scholar of Han Dynasty named Ban Zhao (116 C.E.) developed this teaching in her book: *Lessons for Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡), where she observed that women's confinement to the home (*Nei*, 内) should not be used as an excuse for denying them access to self-cultivation. She advocated women's education:

"Is not then the fact that those gentlemen do teach their sons and do not teach their daughters, unreasonable discrimination?" Regarded as the first book focused on women's education, *Lessons for Women*, nevertheless, has been criticized for perpetuating the patriarchal spirit in which "men are venerable, and women are debased." Ban Zhao's pioneering work later shaped traditional understandings of women's role and education, as later developed in three books in different periods of Chinese history: Song Ruoxin's and Song Ruozhao's *Analects for Women* (*Nü lunyu*) Empress Renxiaowen's *Teachings for the Inner Court* (*Neixun*), and Madame Liu's (Chaste Widow Wang's) *Short Records of Models for Women* (*Nüfan jielu*).

While Ban Zhao's instructions have been popularized throughout the premodern period of Chinese history as the "Three Submissions and Four Virtues" (三從四德, *Sāncóng Sìdé*), nowadays it is blamed for promoting an extreme form of discrimination and oppression of women, stripping their thoughts and lives of freedom and autonomy. Nevertheless, by careful examination and pondering, don't those *Four Books of Women* (*Nü Sishu*) also provide a way toward women's self-cultivation and consciousness-raising, encouraging them to fight for freedom to be educated and to contribute to the common good? (Pang-White, 2018) Aren't those female scholars seeking to reinterpret the Confucian teaching also striving to make themselves *Junzi* by self-cultivation and helping other women to do so?

Acting

Can a woman be a *Junzi*? Yes, and judging from the virtues possessed by *Junzi*, women may even be naturally more gifted as *Junzi*. Are women exerting their rightful place and influence among those claiming *Junzi* leadership?

No, unfortunately. The movement for women's emancipation has been there for decades, yet women are still noticeably underrepresented in leadership roles in business, in politics and other public service sectors.

What should be done to cultivate more women *Junzi* leaders? Here are some thoughts for further reflection:

For women, it is fundamental that they have the confidence and motivation. Grab the chance when it is presented, and don't back off with apprehensions of not being perfect enough or worrying about their credentials. Be motivated! The glass ceiling might just exist in your own minds. And for women, encourage your daughters to achieve their dreams and dare to be leaders.

For men, support your wives and the other women in your lives to realize the fullness of their gifts. Abandon the bias that women should stay home and fulfil their duties as wives and mothers. In the workplace, respect your female colleagues and leaders for who they really are. Don't let your own anxieties spill over into macho envy, expressed in conspiratorial and malicious subversion of women's abilities and exercise of administrative responsibilities.

For the government, provide women with realistic and effective policies and measures to relieve them from the heavy burden of caring for the family while working to achieve their best outside the home. If women were given support, they would achieve much more than what is commonly expected of them.

Most importantly, the inherited mentality and social view of women should be changed and transformed. Leave behind the obstinate old teachings and gender stereotypes.

No doubt! Women can achieve high standards of *Junzi* leadership and even be the better ones!

Conclusion

In answering the question "Can a woman be a *Junzi*," we revisited some of Confucius' teachings and the *Four Books of Women (Nü Sishu)* and concluded that there should be no barriers to women realizing themselves as *Junzi*. Our findings are consistent with contemporary research on how women have contributed to the struggle against the Covid pandemic. To promote more women in leadership, some ideas were proposed addressing each gender's efforts to be made, as well the government and society's role in changing inherited biases and stereotypes.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you read from Confucius teaching on *Nvzi* and *Xiaoren*?
2. Do you think Confucianism is sexist? Why and why not?
3. What is your answer for the question of "Can a Woman become a *Junzi*"?
4. Do you think women can be better *Junzi* leaders than men? Why and Why not?



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