

CONFUCIAN WOMEN, WOMEN CONFUCIANS: REASSESSING CONFUCIANISM AND WOMEN'S STATUS BEFORE THE MEIJI PERIOD¹

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Abstract

This paper reassesses Confucianism's role in shaping women's lives in early modern Japan. It starts with an analysis of the most common misconceptions found in Anglophone feminist scholarship, then introduces other socio-religious factors that also contributed to the development of the danson jōhi mentality beyond (Neo-)Confucian morality/thought. It next questions the modern view that Confucianism was uniquely and uniformly detrimental to women's education and intellectual agency by foregrounding notable female Confucian scholars of the Edo period and the context of their intellectual development. The paper argues that, within the socio-cultural landscape of Edo Japan, Confucianism was not monolithically patriarchal/detrimental to women; rather, it played a complex and at times empowering role. Ultimately, the paper invites a re-evaluation of Confucianism's historical impact on Japanese women.

Keywords: Confucianism; danson jōhi; Onna daigaku; women's education; feminism; early-modern Japan.

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1. Introduction

This paper is part of a larger project that aims to reassess the role of Confucianism in shaping women's lives in early modern and modern Japan, starting from its evaluation in modern and contemporary feminist (or women-centered intellectual) discourses. I have explored elsewhere the possibility that some of the persistent misconceptions that exist in contemporary feminist evaluations of Confucianism owe a great deal to Fukuzawa Yukichi's (1835-1901) *Onna daigaku hyōron* 女大

(1899), a critique of Confucianism that focused exclusively on the educational primer for women, *Onna daigaku* (first published in 1716 and widely attributed to Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekken). There, I argued that Fukuzawa's interpretation played a significant role in cementing the near-perfect correspondence between *Onna daigaku* and Confucianism in modern feminist thought (Mustatea, 2025).

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Building on my previous argument, I seek to address here some of these misconceptions, especially as they appear in (primarily) academic English-language accounts which focus on Japanese feminism or women's intellectual history. In assessing the validity of these criticisms, 1) I will discuss the role Confucianism played in the development of the *danson jōhi* 男尊 mentality within the socio-religious context of premodern and early modern Japan and will introduce some key elements that are often missing from contemporary feminist accounts of Confucianism, and 2) I will examine the examples of several female Confucian scholars of the Edo period, in order to dispute the enduring interpretation that Confucianism was particularly detrimental to women from a social, educational, and intellectual perspective. In the concluding part of the paper, I will briefly explore why Confucianism's more positive impact on women's socio-intellectual lives in Edo Japan has been largely overlooked in the intellectual history of Confucianism and why Confucianism has come to be unilaterally perceived as particularly detrimental to women's lives in early modern Japan. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to refine the existing academic discourse on Confucianism's legacy in modern and contemporary Japan, especially as it concerns its impact on women's intellectual and social development.

2. How is Confucianism evaluated by feminist voices in the contemporary world?

The first point I wish to address concerns some common misconceptions found in contemporary feminist critiques of Confucianism, particularly as they appear in (English) translation or Anglophone research on Japanese feminism and women's intellectual history. The examples provided are not exhaustive, as this is an ongoing project, and I plan to explore the topic further in the future. Nevertheless, I find these examples particularly relevant because they come from feminist voices that have not engaged particularly deeply with Confucianism; this lack of detailed engagement allows for a closer examination of latent, "inherited" misconceptions that surface in contemporary portrayals of Confucianism, revealing broader perceptions present in academic discourse and more broadly in Japanese society.

In her 1997 volume, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism*, Sandra Buckley published a series of interviews with (and writings by) ten feminist figures active between 1988 and 1991. Of the ten women who ultimately made it into her volume, only two were full-time academics at the time: Ide Sachiko, a linguist at the Japanese Women's University, and Ueno Chizuko, a sociologist at the University of Tokyo. The remaining eight were public feminist intellectuals active in various other fields, including a politician, a publisher, a practicing lawyer, and the feminist icon Matsui Yayori, one of the most senior women in the Japanese newspaper industry.

The discussions between Buckley and her interviewees mainly focused on the limited availability of Japanese feminist materials in translation and the dominant modes of representation of Japanese women in both feminist and nonfeminist Western texts. However, quite a few interviewees were also asked to comment on the causes of systemic sexism in Japan, and in this context, many of the women interviewed referenced pre-Meiji period elements, with some specifically mentioning Confucianism. According to her introductory comments, Buckley also made a conscious effort to select a diverse group of interviewees – whose opinions sometimes clashed vigorously, as was the case with Aoki Yayoi and Ueno Chizuko – in order “to emphasize the multiplicity of Japanese feminism(s)” present in Japanese society around the 1990s and to dissipate the misconception that Japan had no significant feminist presence (Buckley, 1997: xvi). The multitude of voices she introduces in the volume is why I consider these examples to be not only representative of the concerns of contemporary academic feminism but also – on the point of Confucianism – of common perceptions (and misconceptions) within academic feminist circles, as well as the broader society. Below, I will discuss the comments made by Aoki Yayoi, Kōra Rumiko, Matsui Yayori, and Ueno Chizuko.

Aoki Yayoi (1927-2009) was a well-known ecofeminist in Japan, among the first to theorize the relationship between the imperial system and women’s lives (Buckley, 1997:1-2). In the fragment from her *Feminism and Imperialism*, translated in Buckley’s volume, Aoki’s take on the role of Confucianism in early modern women’s lives seems to be a conceptual amalgamation of the *ie* system, *bushi* morality, and Confucianism, which were, according to her, seamlessly transferred into modern social structures. In particular, she states that *bushi* morality, grounded in Confucianism, was carried into Meiji-period policies, as the new ruling elite chose to model the new national morality on this rather than on commoner morality: “It could be argued, in fact, that they universalized the Confucian style of morality they carried with them into the Meiji period and that one consequence of their attempts to ‘raise standards’ was a further intensification of their contempt for the people”, embodied in the Meiji Civil Code. As an example of this, she gives the example of marriage and the weakness of bloodline bonds in communal village morality—in terms of adoption, marriage, and inheritance (Buckley, 1997: 21). She concludes by stating:

In other words, the portion of Japanese society that lived under the stoic morality of Confucianism and defended the patriarchal structure of parent-child relations and inheritance patterns – both essential elements of the ie system – was the warrior class, a mere 6 percent of the population. (Aoki, in Buckley, 1997: 21)

Kōra Rumiko (1932-), a poet, novelist, and critic, identifies Neo-Confucian morality as the main culprit that oppressed and “constrained women at every level of their daily lives”, and limited the circulation of their literary and intellectual work in the public space:

No matter how rich the culture of that period [Edo], might have been, it was not a period conducive to women's writing. It was a period of oppression for women. The Neo-Confucian morals of the period constrained women at every level of their daily life. [...] Women have written, especially short poems, throughout Japanese history, but there have only been two periods that were conducive to the circulation of women's writing in the public domain – the Nara-Heian period and the modern period. The external conditions affecting women's lives have only allowed for the possibility of a public voice for women at these two times. (Buckley, 1997: 110-111)

Matsui Yayori (1934-2002), a senior staff editor at Asahi Shinbun and an icon of second-wave feminism in Japan, who has written extensively about Japan's complicity in the expansion of prostitution networks and practices in South-East Asia, links the long history of prostitution culture with the "deeply rooted sexist and patriarchal attitudes that show the influence of Confucian ideology". She explains the origins of the "incomparable prosperity of Japan's sex industry" as follows:

Japan has a long history of prostitution culture, based on deeply rooted sexist and patriarchal attitudes that show the influence of Confucian ideology. [...] It was considered unethical for a married couple to enjoy sexual pleasure. Women were supposed to follow the Confucian rule of the three obediences: as a daughter, obey the father; as a wife, the husband; and as a mother, the son. (Buckley, 1997: 147-148)

She then goes on to discuss the contradiction between this type of morality and the overarching tolerance towards the prostitution system, a dichotomy that has persisted in contemporary Japanese society due to the leniency shown to men who visit prostitutes (who were seen as a special category, less than human), but not for cheating.

Ueno Chizuko (1948-), a sociologist and professor at the University of Tokyo, is the only interviewee in Buckley's volume to exhibit a more nuanced understanding of the extent of Confucian influence on women's lives. During a discussion on the prevalence of themes such as (feminine) nurture and the protection of motherhood in the Japanese feminist discourse, she identifies (at least) two main sources for this specific state of affairs in Japan: Confucianism, as well as "the shared experience of living within households traditionally based on an agrarian social structure", which, alongside East-Asian religions, tend to place a higher value on women (Buckley 1997: 280-281). She also notes that this background likely points to a certain degree of resistance among (especially early Meiji) feminists themselves to fully reject the Confucian communitarian worldview and to embrace absolute "equality and sameness" between the sexes. In other words, she sees the legacy of Confucianism in modern women's lives as interconnected with the focus on mothering and women's nurturing role in Japanese feminism (Buckley, 1997: 280).

There are other, more recent examples of a similar take on Confucianism concerning women's lives in early modern and modern Japan in Anglophone scholarship, which highlight the persistent and pervasive nature of this perception of Confucianism among scholars of women's studies.

Kano Ayako, for example, effectively conflates Confucianism with the *ryōsai kenbo* discourse pervasive in modern Japan when she argues that the Japanese state's reliance on women's unpaid labor within the family, both before and after the war, is a distinctly "Confucian" trait, contributing to women's marginalization in the paid economy and the political sphere":

Even as demographic trends have morphed the picture of the actual family beyond recognition, the state has long held on to the family model consisting of male breadwinners and female homemakers. The reliance on women's unpaid labor in the family has also meant the relegation of women to the margins of the paid economy and of electoral politics: while women are busy in their role of caring for family members, they find it difficult to climb the corporate ladder or to run for public office. (Kano, 2016: 12-13)

We can also mention here Nimura Janice, who contrasts Tsuda Umeko's progressive educational philosophy with "Confucian" ideas such as the "good wife, wise mother" ideal:

But the purposeful energies of the Sino-Japanese War ebbed quickly. Ume's routine at the Peeresses' School continued, as did her philosophical divergence from Utako Shimoda, a woman whose idea of "good wife, wise mother" was grounded in Confucian obedience, not Western liberal arts. (Nimura, 2015: Chapter 13, Section 5)

Or

Ume's philosophy strayed far from the Confucian idea of a woman's place, and she was acutely aware that the students of Joshi Eigaku Juku were pioneers, with a grave responsibility to disprove the disapproving. In Ume's mind, the very future of higher education for women in Japan was at stake. (Nimura, 2015: Chapter 14, Section 5)

Similar perspectives on Confucianism's impact on women can also be found in accounts focusing on Japanese intellectual and philosophical history, such as Kitagawa Sakiko's chapter "Women Philosophers" in Heisig et al.'s *Sourcebook of Japanese Philosophy* (2011), a comprehensive volume of Japanese philosophical texts in translation, compiled with the engagement of specialists from all around the world. In her chapter, Kitagawa briefly touches upon Confucianism's influence on women's lives along the following lines, remarking on its supposed failure to produce women disciples on account of its repressive ideals for women, and again focusing on *Onna daigaku* as a central argument:

Confucianism presents an entirely different case [from Zen Buddhism, which produced “sizeable numbers of women disciples” throughout the Tokugawa period and ultimately came to be adopted by feminist thinkers such as Hiratsuka Raichō]. Its fixation on the innate moral and intellectual inferiority of women to men, though slow to take root in ancient Japan, eventually came to play a crucial role in the formation of Japan’s social conscience. Neo-Confucianism was the mainstream ideology during the Edo period. The feudal class system was supported by *The Great Learning for Women* [*Onna daigaku*], a work attributed to Kaibara Ekken that promoted “submission and obedience” as the ideal for women. Even after the Restoration, for most of society, the idea of “feminine docility” remained as transparent as the air they breathed. [...] It was in this context that Fukuzawa Yukichi, convinced of the absolute equality of the sexes, spoke out against Confucian education [...]. Fourteen years later, in his *Critique of The Great Learning for Women*, he was still warning women to be on their guard against its insidious teachings, and encouraging them instead to “cultivate self-respect and defend their rights.” [...] Despite these efforts, echoed among women’s circles with increasing frequency, it was not until after Japan’s defeat in World War II that this Confucian bias would come to its end. (Kitagawa, 2011: 1120)

Many of the examples above reflect the view that Confucianism was an unequivocally and inherently oppressive force in women’s lives in early modern and modern Japan, one that entrenched their confinement within the household and limited their public roles. In many of these instances – some purely academic, and some more generic – the term “Confucianism” seems to be employed as a shorthand for feudalism, systemic sexism, or restrictive gender roles, and often amalgamates Confucian ideals with *bushi* morality and the *ie* system, framing Confucianism as the main foundation of Japan’s patriarchal social structures. *Onna daigaku*, in particular, emerges as a central tool of Confucian gender oppression. While some feminist intellectuals – generally Japanese academics engaged in women’s studies, like Ueno Chizuko – point to a more complex web of structures that shaped gender roles in Japan, the bulk of the above examples reveal recurring arguments and rather broad generalizations about Confucianism’s impact on women’s lives. In most cases, Confucianism seems more commonly and uncritically conflated with all forms of gender oppression and, more broadly speaking, the mentality of *danson jōhi*.

However, as briefly mentioned previously, the well-known association between Confucianism and *Onna daigaku* as the epitome of pre-Meiji and Meiji misogynistic attitudes – as well as the main causes of *danson jōhi* – can be better described as a modern construct, traceable to Fukuzawa Yukichi’s *Onna daigaku hyōron* (1899). In this text, the philosopher strongly condemns the Edo-period primer for promoting the *danson jōhi* mentality, which he saw as a direct consequence of Confucian thought:

Even though men engage in unbelievable, beastly acts, women endure and persevere to the utmost limits. This is a remnant of the brutal ages of antiquity, and it is none other than the full realization of the teachings of *Onna daigaku*. (Fukuzawa, in Ballhatchet, 2017: 55)

In *Onna daigaku hyōron*, through a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of *Onna daigaku*, Fukuzawa sets out to expose the extreme bias Confucianism held against women, advocate for women's "equality," and simultaneously criticize Confucian doctrine overall.³ While his critique played a crucial role in exposing the sexist practices still prevalent in Meiji society, *Onna daigaku hyōron* also helped solidify a grossly simplified narrative that equated Confucianism with misogyny – one that overlooked the fundamental causes of systemic gender discrimination that extended beyond the moral framework of Edo-period Confucianism. In the conclusion of the text, Fukuzawa also attributed the oppression of women to the "tyranny" of the "feudal hereditary system," stating that "in the past, during the feudal era, everything was determined by lineage, and under a world organized by oppression – starting with politics – gender relations naturally conformed to the general trend, with men treated as rulers and women as subjects" (Fukuzawa, in Ballhatchet, 2017: 91).

However, throughout the text, Fukuzawa does not explore the relationship between the "tyranny of the feudal hereditary system" and Confucianism, instead focusing primarily on criticizing Confucianism itself. His subsequent uncritical conflation of Confucian ideology with various values, customs, and family structures of the samurai class risks misrepresenting the actual role Confucianism played in Edo-period women's lives. Notably, many of these values and customs predated the rise and popularization of Confucianism in the Edo period.

This oversimplified interpretation of Confucianism by Fukuzawa took on a life of its own, repeatedly resurfacing in modern and contemporary feminist critiques of Confucianism. His critique of *Onna daigaku* also contributed to the text's constant prominence in the public space (Aoyama, 1956), prompting both progressive and conservative intellectuals of the Meiji period to engage with the primer either as a tradition worth keeping or as the ultimate symbol of gender suppression in Japanese society. While Fukuzawa's critique positioned *Onna daigaku* as a remnant of outdated Confucian gender norms, for conservative intellectuals such as Inoue

³ However, it should be noted that he never strayed far from the very framework he was criticizing. His concept of "gender equality" was strictly limited to equality within marriage and never extended to women's broader social rights. Even in the ideal social order of a new era free from Confucian gender discrimination, intellectuals like Fukuzawa could not ignore the realities of women's lives, nor did they attempt to change them. For most women at the time, education for girls was primarily seen as a of teaching them how to fulfil domestic roles, while marriage, household duties, and child-rearing were considered natural lifelong pursuits (Koyama, 2022). Thus, Fukuzawa's choice to critique Confucianism through *Onna aigaku* appears somewhat perplexing.

Tetsujirō (1855-1944), it came to symbolize a sort of cultural resistance to Westernization: the text was used to emphasize the division of family roles, reinforce obligations to the state, and justify the sacrifices of loyal subjects (Ballhatchet, 2017: 47). Within this context, it is unsurprising that feminist figures such as Yamakawa Kikue chose *Onna daigaku* as a subject of critique, or that some 21st-century feminists continue to see it as a Confucian text that defined Edo-period women's experiences and limitations.

Against this background, it is perhaps also not difficult to understand how Confucianism, which brought about more nuanced changes in women's lives in the Edo period, became drastically simplified and distorted during Japan's modernization. During this period, Confucianism functioned both as a symbol of a tradition to be overcome – for figures such as Fukuzawa and the feminists of the Taishō era – and of a tradition to be preserved or reinforced, for conservative voices such as Inoue Tetsujirō's. Given this historical trajectory, it is also not surprising that little attention has been paid to the more complex factors beyond *Onna daigaku*'s popularity and its so-called Confucian worldview that contributed to the subordination of women in the Edo period.⁴

In Japanese-language research on the social and intellectual history of Edo Japan, this trend of scapegoating Confucianism for the low position of women in society is slowly reversing. Some intellectual historians have denounced the attribution of the *danson jōhi* mentality solely to Confucianism (Minamoto, 2015; Ōgoshi, 1993); others criticize the tendency to scapegoat Confucianism for most of modern women's plight in terms of gender discrimination. Koyama (2022), for instance, makes an important point about motherhood in early modern Japan, citing Confucian views from *Onna daigaku* as an example. She argues that motherhood – so intricately associated with the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology, itself so deeply connected with allegedly Confucian values – was in fact a modern invention, and not particularly Confucian in nature. The argument she makes is that in early modern families, the responsibility for educating male children was traditionally assigned to the father, whereas *ryōsai kenbo* shifts that responsibility to the mother, thereby profoundly redefining her role within the household and the nation; this shift more or less aligns the ideal of motherhood with the values of the emerging modern state. In a more general sense, some scholars are questioning the very extent of Confucian influence during the Edo period, suggesting that the perception of early modern society as being dominated by Confucianism was a uniquely modern construct (Watanabe, 2010).

These perspectives put forth more recently by Japanese intellectual and social historians raise important questions about how much influence can truly be attributed to Confucianism with regard to women's lives during the Edo period and whether the importance of *Onna daigaku* itself was not, in fact, exaggerated by Fukuzawa

⁴ See Mustatea 2025 for a more detailed discussion.

and subsequent theoreticians. However, this trend has yet to permeate feminist discourses and Anglophone scholarship (or scholarship translated into English) on the subject, as shown in this section.

3. Women beyond Confucianism in premodern and early modern Japan

In this section, I will explore some of the aspects often overlooked by feminist theorists like those discussed in the first part of the paper. These aspects have recently started being examined in Japanese and Anglophone academia, particularly in the field of women's intellectual history (see, for example, Gramlich-Oka, 2010, Gramlich-Oka et. al., 2020 or Koyama, 2022), but are not present in more generalist feminist discourses or Anglophone scholarship on Japanese feminism or Confucianism (such as Kitagawa, 2011). Specifically, I will examine two key factors: (1) the socio-historical context, which traces the complex evolution of gender relations in Japan beyond the Confucian influence, and (2) spiritual and religious influences, with a focus on Buddhism, which significantly shaped women's lives in Japan long before the spread of Confucianism and includes some of the core misogynistic elements often imputed to Confucianism (such as the three obediences – to father, husband, and son). While by no means a complete account, this approach challenges the dominant perception in contemporary feminist discourses that attributes women's social subordination primarily to Confucianism, revealing a much more intricate tapestry of historical, religious, and cultural influences.

3.1 Women and social status

The transformation of gender relations in Japan was a gradual process, much older and more nuanced than the forced connection made to (Neo-)Confucianism.

According to Tonomura (2007), prior to the 7th century, Japanese kinship was defined by bilateral lineage patterns, irrespective of class. Ancient marriage and sexual practices required no formal, contractual agreements; as far as sources such as *fudōki*, *Kojiki*, or local gazetteers show, marriage was often preceded by sexual relations and, overall, there was “no moral censure toward sex per se” (Tonomura, 2007: 354). Early lineage records noted both male and female ancestry for several generations, both on the paternal and maternal sides, and including both male and female children (Yoshie and Goodwin, 2005: 439). Marriage practices were flexible across society, exhibiting varied patterns (duolocal, uxorilocal, or virilocal), and women generally maintained their social and financial independence, even according to records of land sale and purchase from as late as the 8th century, where women's names are frequently listed as property owners (Yoshie and Goodwin, 2005: 441; Tonomura, 2007: 355). During this period, it seems that the ties between mother and children were essential, whereas the conjugal couple did not exist as a solid social

unit as might be construed today. Many records show single-parent households, which put daughters with mothers and sons with fathers (Tonomura, 2007).

However, the Taika Reforms of 645 initiated a slow shift away from this model and towards patrilineality by formally establishing that children born between free subjects belonged to the father's lineage. By the beginning of the 9th century, official lineage records came to include only male offspring, listed in order of birth (rather than grouping children born to the same mother, as was the case earlier), and their paternal lineage (Yoshie and Goodwin, 2005). The establishment of the Kamakura bakufu in the 12th century marked another important point in the evolution of gender relations, as we see a shift towards virilocal marriage practices. This established a more stable conjugal relationship and bound the wife to the household of her husband. Adding to this was the increasingly competitive mood in Japanese (military) society, which worsened against the backdrop of the Mongol invasions of the 13th century and further entrenched women of the *bushi* class within rigid social structures designed to protect the household and male lineage. In these emerging structures, the power of the patriarch expanded considerably; women were slowly dispossessed of land and inheritance rights through the unigeniture practice, and their chastity became a matter of primordial importance for the protection of the household. For women in the upper classes, this effectively resulted in the wife's subordination to her husband, and the husband's subordination to his (male or female) master (Wakita, 1999).

By the Muromachi period, Japanese society was exhibiting conflicting family patterns, in which women led very different lives depending on their social status and geographical location – while women in the upper classes became increasingly subordinate to their husbands, commoners – peasants, artisans, and merchants – exhibited much more flexible family structures, in which men and women worked alongside each other to sustain the household, they could divorce and remarry relatively freely, and women could have more autonomous roles and economic opportunities, especially in the cities. Merchant and artisan households, for example, retained the *yoriaikon* pattern of marriage, with women generally managing food and clothing and husbands taking care of the dwelling (Walthall, 1991; Robertson, 1991; Wakita, 1999).

Despite women maintaining an overall more equitable position, especially in peasant households, the establishment of the bakufu as a military and legislative authority enabled the feudal lords of the medieval period to use the household unit as the basis of social control. This led to male householders being made accountable for all productive operations, even those performed by women, such as pottery, sake, or textiles. As a result, women's non-household-related activities gradually disappeared from official records (Wakita, 1999). Despite differences in status, this omission of women from records grew ever more conspicuous across all social strata. According to Gramlich-Oka, the recorded stories about women and their value depended on the

level of record keeping – women from upper social strata, insofar as they were connected to the male heads of the household, are more easily identifiable today, as some details on the daimyo's wives, concubines, and daughters were documented; however, as a general trend, daughters who married were only identified in their husband's government lineages, while daughters who didn't marry were often not recorded at all (Gramlich-Oka et. al, 2020: 23). This pattern also applies to literati women, as recent studies show. Information on women intellectuals is now available to us exclusively through biographical data on the male scholars of the period (for a detailed analysis, see Beerens, 2016).

In other words, the process of disempowering women and entrenching them in a social position subordinate to men was already well underway by the time (Neo-)Confucianism became influential in Japanese early modern society, and also varied greatly across social classes. It was a much more intricate and lengthy process, largely driven by the claim for political authority, but also supported by underlying cultural and religious practices, as we will see below.

3.2 Women and Buddhism

Recent scholarship has begun to question the extent of Confucian influence on mainstream Japanese society. Watanabe Hiroshi, for example, challenges the notion that Confucianism was a dominant social force in early modern Japan, arguing that this perception is largely a form of modern post-rationalization (Watanabe, 2010: 16). He even contends that Confucian scholars (*jusha* 儒者) were often ridiculed, and their overall influence on society was relatively limited (Watanabe, 1990: 24). Similarly, Koyama's analysis of motherhood and the evolution of the *ryōsai kenbo* ideal in modern Japan suggests that the underlying ideals supporting this discourse were not inherently Confucian or early modern, but largely constructs that emerged within the logic of modernization (Koyama, 2022).

While feminist critiques of Confucianism often focus on the concept of the three obediences (*sanjū* 三従 – a woman's obedience to her father, her husband, and her son), they frequently overlook two important aspects: the pervasive notion of women's inferiority present in Chinese doctrines and philosophies imported into Japan (beyond Confucianism), and the fact that the root of the three obediences – the “five obstacles and three obediences” (*goshō sanjū* 五障三従) – is also intrinsic to Buddhism, and can be traced back to ancient Brahmanic traditions, particularly the text *Manusmṛiti* (The Laws of Manu). This challenges the arguments linking Confucianism exclusively to misogynistic attitudes in Japan, especially considering that Buddhist texts and proselytism played an essential role in spreading misogynistic views in medieval Japan long before the appearance of the much-reviled primer for women, *Onna daigaku*.

The ways in which Buddhism contributed to the gradual exclusion of women from institutional hierarchies and the spread of *danson johi* have been documented in detail (Takemi, 1983; Meeks, 2010; Ambros, 2015) and would be worth exploring in their own paper. Below, I will only briefly summarize its major contributions.

According to Meeks (2010), women continued to play a significant role in Japanese Buddhist practice during the Nara and Heian periods. They participated in court ceremonies, held influential positions, were active in local communities, and established numerous nunneries with the support of influential female aristocrats. However, things started changing toward the end of the Nara period and the beginning of the Heian period, leading to the gradual removal of women from ordination and a drastic decline in the number of nunneries in Japan (Meeks, 2010). One major shift happened in 772 when the *Naikubu jūzenji* 内供奉十禪師 regulations, introduced by Emperor Kōnin, placed all Buddhist matters under the exclusive control of ten male monks. Later, the new system of annual ordinands implemented by Emperor Kanmu in 806 (upon the advice of Saichō) moved to effectively bar women from ordination and sect leadership. This policy led to the gradual disappearance of nunneries from records for about four hundred years, as many of them lost support, were abandoned, or repurposed as temples for male monks (Yoshida, 2003:15).

Paradoxically, during the medieval period, a renewed and much-acclaimed interest in women's salvation among Buddhist thinkers ultimately led, in practice, to the further popularization of misogynistic attitudes. This is especially evident in texts such as *The Blood Bowl Sutra* (Ketsubon kyō 血盆經), *Mirror for Women* (Tsuma kagami 妻鏡, 1300), or *The Tale of the Fuji Cave* (Fuji no hitoana sōshi 富士の人穴草子, early 16th C), all of which served as important didactic materials for women at the time.

The Blood Bowl Sutra, which had circulated in Japan since the Muromachi period, is another essential text used for the salvation of women in medieval and early modern Japan. It was used as an amulet by pregnant women for safe childbirth, as a charm against impurity in the Sōtō sect, as prayers for the rebirth of women in the Western Paradise, or as part of ceremonies for the salvation of women who had died in childbirth (the *Bussetsu Mokuren shōkyō ketsubon kyō* version). This text, too, depicts women as inherently impure and sinful, cursed to suffer in the Hell of Menstruation Blood due to the pollution caused by menstruation and childbirth:

The venerable Mokuren put the following question to the Buddha: Once I went to such-and-such prefecture, and saw in the middle of a large field there a Hell composed of a pond of menstruation blood, [...] and in the middle women who were wearing handcuffs and ankle chains were undergoing hardships. [...] Their screams of anguish could be heard from great distances away. The sight of this made me very

sad, and so I asked the Lord of the Hell why the women were being forced to undergo such hardships. He replied that the blood the women had shed during the birth of their children had polluted the deity of the earth and that, furthermore, when they washed their polluted garments in the river, that water was gathered up by a number of virtuous men and women and used to make tea to serve to holy men. [...] [Mokuren] asked, then, what he needed to do for the women to be saved from their punishments in the pond of blood. The Buddha then [...] said it would be necessary for them to respect the three treasures of filial piety, to call on Mokuren, to hold a Blood pool Liberation service, to read sutras, to have an esoteric ceremony, then to make a boat and float it off. (*The Blood Bowl Sutra*, tr. in Takemi, 1983: 231-232)

According to Takemi (1983), this sutra was widely used to preach that “all women, even those who are the children of high families, have no faith and conduct no practices, but rather have strong feelings of avarice and jealousy. These sins are thus compounded and become menstrual blood, and every month this flows out, polluting the god of the earth in addition to the spirits of the mountains and rivers. In retribution for this, women are condemned to the Blood Pool Hell” (*Yūkoku-yain* (1821), in Takemi, 1983: 235).

Mirror for Women (Tsuma kagami 妻鏡, 1300), written by Mujū Ichien (1227-1312), was a popular religious tract (*kana hōgo*) that reflected the transitioning Buddhist values of the time, including Pure Land, Zen, Tendai and Shingon practices (*Mirror for Women*, tr. by Morrell, 1980: 45). Although intended for women’s salvation, this text portrays women as inherently sinful for awakening sexual desire in men, jealous, malicious, selfish, deceitful, envious, neglecting religious practice, vain and lustful, dishonest and vengeful, shameless, ritually unclean, and stained by menstruation and the effluvia of childbirth, therefore attracting evil spirits and dispelling benevolent divinities.

Fuji no hitoana sōshi, used in late-medieval street preaching, was a popular Buddhist entertainment piece, performed by blind minstrel priests (*zatō* 座頭), picture-explaining nuns (*etoki bikuni* 絵解き比丘尼), mountain ascetics (*yamabushi* 山伏), and mendicant shrine maidens (*miko* 巫女) (Kimbrough, 2007: 113). Surviving in numerous Edo manuscripts, the text claims that women are inherently more sinful than men, stating, “both men and women fall into hell, but many more women do than men. Women’s thoughts are all evil. [...] Women don’t know their own transgressions, which is why they fail to plant good karmic roots” (tr. Ambros, 2015: 90).

In other words, long before (Neo-)Confucian morality became influential, many other factors had contributed to the emergence of a *danson jōhi* mentality in Japan. The establishment of the *ritsuryō* system, the shift to male-centered *bushi* values, bakufu legislative power, and Buddhist (Zen) proselytism are only a few of these factors. Together, they laid the foundation for texts like *Onna daigaku* to be deemed

suitable for women's education in Edo society, exerting a much deeper influence than Confucian social norms during the period.

4. Confucian women and women Confucians in the Edo period

This background also accounts, to a certain extent, for the fact that Japanese Confucian philosophers of the Edo period, overwhelmingly men, made little to no attempt to address the issue of women in a more satisfying way from a contemporary perspective. The long fascination with Chinese cultural and governance models in Japan did not alert Confucian thinkers of the Edo period to the necessity of rethinking social roles beyond the examples given by the Chinese Classics, nor to the necessity of questioning contemporary social practices in Japan, with regard to – but not limited to – women. Being themselves overwhelmingly part of – or addressing – a predominantly male *bushi* class, they tended to focus on issues relevant to that group, and they paid no heed to discriminatory ideas already embedded in the social fabric.

However, if Buddhism was updated in the modern period – often used by Japanese feminists such as Hiratsuka Raichō (1886-1971) to approach feminist concerns (Yusa, 2009, in Heisig et al., 2011) – the same did not happen to Confucianism. Instead, as mentioned earlier, Confucianism ended up being reclaimed by conservatives and reviled by progressives, being labeled as the main culprit of male chauvinism in Japanese society. However, much as in the case of Buddhism, Confucianism's influence on women's lives before the modern period was multifaceted. For all the criticism aimed at it by many modern and contemporary feminist thinkers, Confucianism also contributed significantly to the social and intellectual emancipation of women in Edo Japan. As Tucker (2011) points out, Confucians have been among the most systematic educational philosophers in Japanese history, and they consistently emphasized education for women. Even the popularity of *Onna daigaku* – as regressive as it seems by our standards nowadays – was a result of emphasizing the importance of women's roles in society and the family. Overall, Confucianism contributed more than any other system of thought to a well-educated society in Edo-period Japan (Tucker, 2011: 296-7). The impact of this on some women's lives became particularly noticeable toward the end of the Edo period and continued into the early Meiji period, with some women even becoming scholars of Confucianism themselves, albeit not always under that label (Mehl, 2001).

Furthermore, Confucian scholarship itself was not monolithic. While Ogyū Sorai's (1666-1728) perspective is often cited for its restrictive and elitist view on human nature and women (Sekiguchi, 2005), other scholars displayed more inclusive views, both philosophically and in practice. Notable Confucian scholars such as Nakae Tōju (1608-1648), Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), Kumazawa Banzan (1619-1691), Sakuma Shōzan (1811-1864), and Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859) consistently showed interest

in women's moral cultivation. In some cases, even Shōheizaka Gakumonchō, the Tokugawa shogunate's official Confucian academy (founded by Hayashi Razan) was known to occasionally accept women as disciples, as was the case with Takashima Bunpō (1791-1857), who studied under Hayashi Jussai (1768-1841) (Nagase, 2007: 23).

While it is true that none of the thinkers mentioned above went so far as to reject women's innate inferiority – a common criticism brought against Confucians, but also a pervasive belief among most Edo-period intellectuals – many of them were staunch believers in the self-cultivation of all human beings according to their station in life. Nakae Tōjū, although he uncritically supported the Buddhist view that women are innately and profoundly sinful, also believed that women's pursuit of learning was essential for their own “control of the mind” and for the happiness, peace, and prosperity of their family:

[...] it would not be right for women not to pursue the learning of the mind and heart. If a wife's mind is healthy, filial, obedient, compassionate, and honest, then her parents and children, brothers and sisters, and, in fact, every member of her family will be at peace and the entire household in perfect order, so that even lowly servants benefit from her gracious bounty. That kind of family will enjoy abundant happiness and its children and grandchildren will also prosper as a result. [...] These days learning for women simply means being able to read. Because people do not discern that learning consists in controlling the mind, they now wonder whether or not learning should be the business of women. This principle must be well understood. We must be careful to make sure that women are taught well so that our families are not torn asunder like meat being ripped from the bones. (Tōju, tr. in Heisig et al., 2011: 323)

As Jennifer Robertson notes, the male intelligentsia's concern with women's morality paralleled the rise of a market economy in the Edo period, which created new opportunities for women to engage in independent economic activities (Robertson, 1991: 88). Especially toward the end of the Edo period, numerous Confucian scholars actively encouraged and supported women's pursuit of Confucian studies.

Kaibara Ekken, too, despite his somewhat “tainted” modern reputation on account of *Onna daigaku*, diligently supported his wife's intellectual endeavors (Mehl, 2001). Such examples show that Confucian scholars of the Edo period, although not monolithically, not uniformly, and certainly not calling into question existing social frameworks, were responding to shifts happening in society and new demands forged by an increasingly porous social structure.

The 19th century saw a dramatic increase in the number of women literati, particularly toward the end of the Edo period. Research by Shiba and Katsura (2015),

Kado (2006), and Gramlich-Oka et al. (2020) shows that women's intellectual and literary activities during this period were far more diverse than previously believed. Parents from all social classes would willingly invest in their daughters' education, recognizing that a basic knowledge of morality, etiquette, and lifestyle enhanced their daughters' marriage prospects and facilitated harmonious relationships with their new family, thereby helping them avoid legal disputes (*fundo sōshō* 憤怒) (Tocco, 2003; Lindsey, 2005),⁵ which also explains the popularity of educational primers such as *Onna daigaku*. Moreover, girls who demonstrated an aptitude for learning were often encouraged to pursue the same level of education as boys. This was particularly common, though not exclusive, among families of Confucian scholars (Gramlich-Oka et al., 2020; Fei Wen, 2020). As the institutional framework of education expanded, leading to increased enrollment at *juku* (private academies), many women who traditionally taught their young children, other women, and household servants began teaching neighborhood children, as well. Some of these women went on to educate both boys and girls in local and private schools they established (Fei Wen, 2020), and some even employed other women as educators (Tocco, 2003), showing that "teaching had become a suitable occupation for women as a gender group" (Tocco, 2003: 177).

It is true that, in most cases, a woman's basic education was very much geared towards her expected role in society – wife and daughter-in-law –and therefore an education that would allow her a smooth integration into her husband's family was essential (Tocco, 2003; Koyama, 2022). Additionally, significant obstacles to literacy and scholarship persisted throughout the Edo period for both men and women, although women faced greater challenges. Since *han* schools were restricted to men of the *bushi* class, pursuing an education often required travel – a risky and often unaffordable affair for women unless they came from privileged backgrounds. Consequently, women's higher intellectual pursuits were largely dependent on

⁵ Even the very fact that texts such as *jokun* (didactic writings for women) from the early 18th century and *oraimono* (elementary education textbooks) proliferated widely— alongside the frequent inclusion of sections dedicated to women's books in publishers' catalogs, biographies highlighting women's educational achievements, letter writing manuals, almanacs, and academic primers on subjects like arithmetic – demonstrates the availability of educational materials for women. From the 17th century through the end of the Edo period, particularly around the early 19th century, the variety of subjects covered by these educational materials expanded considerably. By the late 18th century, there was also a noticeable increase in the publication of academic books tailored for women. The emergence of *jokun* reflects the Edo-period scholars' keen interest in addressing the challenges women would face upon entering a husband's household, leading to the creation of popular guides outlining ideal behavior (Tocco, 2003). The popularity of these texts – rather than alerting us to the spread of *danson jōhi* ideas among the population – should instead be understood as an indication of the expanding reach of education (Koyama, 2022).

chance encounters with teachers (Gramlich-Oka et. al, 2020) and significant support from their families.

Despite these pragmatic obstacles to women's education, and despite the fact that Confucian scholars' views on it varied greatly in the Edo period – ranging from admonitions that highly educated women posed a danger to the state (Sekiguchi, 2005) to warnings that uneducated women undermined their station in life (Tocco, 2003) – it cannot be denied that, overall, Confucian thought also helped shape women's educational opportunities and societal roles in ways that significantly challenge modern critiques voiced against it.

One compelling example of this positive influence on women's opportunities for education and intellectual development is the presence of Confucian female scholars who were active in the Edo period, despite their near absence from modern intellectual histories of Confucianism, both in Japanese and Anglophone scholarship.

As mentioned earlier, research by Shiba and Katsura (2015), Kado (2006), and Gramlich-Oka et al. (2020) shows that women's intellectual and literary activity in early modern Japan was much more diverse than previously believed. According to Gramlich-Oka's study, men often took the lead in either organizing intellectual networks in the 18th-19th century or were the fulcrum of their operation. However, these were also centuries when women developed their own intellectual networks, oftentimes including men and crossing status boundaries. In other words, recent studies in history increasingly show that, while Edo society is often simplistically described as two-layered, split between rulers and the ruled, or between men and women, many women, scholars, doctors, religious people, and performers often pursued occupations and interests that defied these seemingly clean-cut categorizations.

As education permeated society and many women started forging their own networks in Edo-period Japan beyond their closest kinship circles, traveling, business, charity, and religion offered them great opportunities (Gramlich-Oka et.al, 2020). Others turned to Confucianism as a career, forging a name for themselves as *Confucians*. These women are all but nonexistent in modern intellectual histories of Confucianism, but, as recent research is discovering, the end of the Edo period saw the number of female *jusha* (女儒) increase.

One relevant example is Takahashi Gyokushō (1802-1868), who was born the daughter of a Sendai merchant. According to Fei Wen (2020), Takahashi established herself as a high-repute Kangaku scholar and specialist in the Chinese Classics. While she was traveling in Edo for study, she came in contact with numerous notable scholars, poets, priests, and artists, and apparently gained quite wide recognition. She went on to establish her own *juku*, where she would sometimes lecture hundreds

of people, and was repeatedly listed as a Confucian scholar in various “notable people” directories of the time, such as *Kōeki shoka jinmeiroku* 廣益諸家人名, *Edo bunjin jumyōzuke*, *Ansei bunga jinmeiroku*, and *Bunkyu bunga jinmeiroku*. While in Edo, she was invited to return to her native Sendai as a teacher of Confucianism for the daimyo and his wife. Notably, despite the widespread popularity of educational primers such as *Onna daigaku* at the time, Takahashi and other women like her were gaining considerable recognition among male Confucian scholars. Takahashi was referred to as *joshi* () by male Confucian and Kangaku scholars of her time, a term which designated a woman of high talent and intellect who was also permitted to teach at *han* schools or private academies (Fei Wen, 2020: 144).

Another notable example is that of Shinoda Unpō (1810-1883), the daughter of physician Shinoda Kasai and niece of *han* Confucian scholar Ishii Jōsai. Encouraged and supported by the men in her family, Shinoda studied under Confucian scholar Isakawa Zen'an, a friend of her father's, and continued as his disciple for some thirteen years until his death (Nagase, 2014). At the age of 13, she started giving lectures on the Confucian classics, and around the age of 20, she was already listed as a female Confucian scholar in the *jinmeiroku* directories that were increasingly published at the time. Quite unconventionally for her era and with the full support of her father, Shinoda married three times of her own volition, and, at the age of 65, she established a private school where she continued to teach until 1878 (Kado, 2006).

Another example, albeit more elusive, is that of (Ishii?) Kyūkō (1845?-?), whose name appears as a Confucian scholar in one of the same registries as Takahashi Gyokushō's, *Bunkyu bunga jinmeiroku* (1862). Although little information is available about her beyond her father's position as a book magistrate and her residence in today's Taitō-ku (Shiba and Katsura, 2015), Ishii's inclusion in the *bunga* registry as a Confucian scholar suggests that she was publicly active and had attained a certain degree of recognition, although her name is all but absent in modern or contemporary research, in Japanese or English.

Miwada Masako (1843-1927), the daughter of a Confucian scholar, was also given the same education a son would have received, as she was an only child. She studied Kangaku and Kokugaku under Confucian scholar Yanagawa Seigan (1789–1858) and his wife Koran (1804–1879). By the age of 12, she was already lecturing at her father's academy, and later she became a house tutor for Iwakura Tomomi, the head of the Iwakura Mission, Japan's first diplomatic voyage to the U.S. and Europe during the Meiji period (Mehl, 2001).

Other examples, many introduced by Nagase (2007), further illustrate this trend of women whose literacy in Chinese and talent as (Confucian) scholars was recognized and encouraged not only by the men in their lives, but also by society at large,

especially towards the latter half of the Edo period. Hara Saikin (1798-1859), for example, daughter of Confucian Hara Kosho, pursued Confucian scholarship in Edo with her father's full support, and went on to support herself thanks to her knowledge. Inoue Tsujo (1660-1738)'s talent as a *kanshi* poet and knowledge of Kangaku was admired by scholars such as Kaibara Ekken and Arai Hakuseki. In 1821, Takashima Bunpō was employed by the shogunate as a teacher for the ladies-in-waiting (Nagase, 2007).

These are just a handful of examples compiled from the limited information currently available; further investigation into the directories of the Edo period will likely yield more results and is the focus of future research. However, from the few examples mentioned above, the lives of these women and their engagement with Confucian scholarship are enough to raise important questions about the role Confucianism played in women's lives from an intellectual perspective. Whether as recognized Confucian scholars (女儒) during the Edo period or as women whose Confucian education provided them with avenues for intellectual growth, their lives and careers challenge the prevailing view of Confucianism as restrictive for early modern women. Instead, they reveal a more complex and multifaceted influence – one that, while reinforcing the existing gender hierarchies, also created spaces for women's learning, agency, and engagement with intellectual discourse.

5. Concluding discussion

One intriguing aspect about these women is that their lives *as Confucian scholars* have been largely overlooked by both modern and postwar research on Confucianism and women's intellectual history. This neglect is likely connected, in part, to the modern tendency to narrow Confucianism down into its most regressive aspects, especially concerning women, as discussed earlier.

Given the omission of Edo-period women Confucian scholars from modern research, there is an inherent issue now in attempting to recover aspects of their lives and define what it meant exactly to be a female *jusha*. As discussed earlier, we know now that women's intellectual and literary activities during the Edo period were far more diverse than previously assumed. Shiba and Katsura's dictionary of women literati lists a substantial number of female Confucian scholars (*jusha*), likely using categories derived from Edo-period registries. However, verifying and defining this category of "female Confucian scholar" () beyond official records presents significant challenges. In the research focusing on women scholars and poets of the Edo period consulted (e.g., Kado, 2006; Shiba and Katsura, 2015; Mibu, 2010; Fei Wen, 2020), I encountered several names identified either as *jusha*, *kanshisha* (Chinese poets), poets, or simply literati, yet clear criteria for these categorizations – and especially for *jusha* – are often absent. This ambiguity raises some crucial

questions regarding early modern and modern categorizations of women's intellectual activities, warranting further investigation.

Additionally, there is a pronounced scarcity of resources documenting women's intellectual lives during the Edo period. Gramlich-Oka et al. (2020) observe that women's lives were largely invisible in historical records from the medieval and early modern periods, largely due to the gendered nature of record-keeping, which was predominantly done by men. Consequently, primary resources on women's lives consist of diaries, letters, and some legal documents, which makes it difficult to reconstruct a comprehensive view of women's intellectual experiences during this period. This issue is also highlighted by Beerens' prosopographic analysis of Edo-period intellectual networks, which shows that (auto)biographical accounts of male intellectuals occasionally reveal details about women literati. However, such information is often presented cursorily and inconspicuously and can easily be overlooked due to the narrative focus on the male intellectual figure, the "hero" of the biography (Beerens, 2016). This lack of institutional oversight complicates efforts to recover women's contributions to Confucian thought in Japanese intellectual history. There is little doubt that the archival gap contributes significantly to the underrepresentation of women in both Edo-period biographical records and contemporary studies of women's intellectual contributions.

However, beyond this archival gap lies a more complex issue, i.e., the ideological transformation of Confucianism during the Meiji period, which significantly influenced modern perceptions of the philosophy. As I discuss elsewhere in more detail (Mustatea, 2025), the Meiji-era reframing of Confucianism as the ideological foundation of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) ideals played a crucial role in shaping contemporary views on Confucianism's relationship to women's lives, and the Edo-period primer *Onna daigaku* was central to this transformation, serving a dual purpose: on the one hand, it supported the political agenda of excluding women from high political roles (Sekiguchi, 2005) and relegating them to a domestic role, while on the other hand, it influenced early feminist thinkers, who sought to distance themselves from these conservative, Confucianesque ideals and align with international definitions of womanhood.

This semantic drift, through which Confucianism acquired new meanings amid rapid cultural shifts, naturally resulted in reductive and polarizing interpretations of Confucianism on both sides of the ideological divide. It is hardly surprising, then, that this contributed to a long-standing reluctance among modern and contemporary Japanese feminists – and, by extension, some Anglophone scholars – to re-evaluate Confucianism's role in early modern women's lives beyond its association with the *danson jōhi* mentality. This, as well as the fragmented and inconsistent nature of archival records from the Edo period, further complicates efforts to reconstruct women's intellectual activities – beyond the preponderance of Edo-period archival records centered on men's lives (Gramlich-Oka et. al., 2020; Beerens, 2016), we

must also take into account the lack of overall systematization and centralization of these records, as well as the loss of entire archives in the 1923 Tokyo earthquake (Cullen, 2013).

However, despite Confucianism's undeniable weakness in challenging Edo-period social norms and relational structures concerning women, the examples in this paper challenge the notion that it was universally restrictive to early modern women. Instead, they reveal a more nuanced reality, in which Confucian scholarship served as an important vehicle for women's intellectual and social agency, as well as public engagement. As shown above, there are quite a few examples of Confucian-educated women in the late Edo period, and even of female Confucian scholars, particularly around urban centers where fathers increasingly encouraged their daughters to pursue an education more aligned with their talents. While their engagement with Confucianism was often informal, it does contradict the philosophical incompatibility between Confucianism and women's education (or their intellectual development) and points to the shifting social realities of the Edo period, amidst which Confucianism created new avenues for women's intellectual activity, enabling them to increasingly participate in the cultural and public spheres.

The historical portrayal of Confucianism as an overwhelmingly rigid, patriarchal doctrine, which began with Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Onna daigaku hyōron* and was later reinforced by both conservative and feminist intellectuals (albeit toward divergent ends), also raises important questions about the dynamics of gender hierarchies in Japanese society and whether their origin can be traced back to Edo-period Confucianism or whether they are, in fact, products of modern ideological constructs. Such a reassessment feels crucial not only for achieving a more accurate historical understanding but also for exploring the potential relevance of Confucian thought in addressing contemporary feminist concerns. This requires moving beyond a monolithic understanding of Confucianism and instead considering the plurality of its philosophical and cultural manifestations. By doing so, we can better evaluate the complex and evolving role Confucianism has played in shaping gender dynamics, allowing for a more nuanced dialogue between historical contexts and modern and contemporary feminist perspectives.

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