

An analysis of Confucianism's *yin-yang* harmony with nature and the traditional oppression of women: Implications for social work practice

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Abstract

• *Summary:* This article introduces basic tenets of Confucianism and its evolution, and explores its unique contribution to socio-cultural practices on gender-based oppression in social work practice.

• *Findings:* The *yin-yang* (陰-陽) relation is originally a cosmic idea that is cyclical and harmonizing, but not oppositional and contradictory. The *yin-yang* binary is not intended to indicate any human relations (gender) or political ethics but the harmony of human nature. Despite the complementary nature of the *yin-yang* union, a confucianized Chinese society consigned *yang* to male and *yin* to female, signifying hierarchal gender relations. Women were considered inferior to men in the patriarchal family system. Misinterpretation of Confucianism promoted hierarchal relationships between men and women and, as a result, dramatically affected the gender-based attitudes and behavior.

• *Applications:* Confucianism, one of the most crucial philosophies of Asian cultural norms, has long been studied from the perspectives of intellectual history and philosophical truth seeking; however, only a few scholarly texts are available in the area of Confucianism and its influence on gender inequality. In particular, this article attempts to help scholars and helping-professionals understand how the harmonious *yin-yang* concept evolved into the contradictory binary, which further perpetrated gender hierarchy and oppression toward women. Limitations of current Confucianism research and implications for social work practice are presented.

Keywords

Social work, confucianism, gender-based oppression, gender inequality, *yin-yang*

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Cultural competency is one of the central themes for social work. Social workers value 'respect and appreciation for individual and group difference', to ensure a pluralistic society that accommodates a variety of cultural beliefs, behaviors, languages, and traditions, rather than merely focusing on assimilating newcomers to mainstream society (Morales, Sheafor, & Scott, 2010). The influx of people with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds is rapidly increasing in North America and in many other countries, and requires that social workers serve people who are in need in a culturally competent way. However, even experienced helping-professionals often face barriers in serving such clients because of inadequate information and the lack of studies related to cultural factors that deal with their attitudes and behaviors. In fact, it is only recently that serious attention has been devoted to analyzing the Asian-specific cultures and traditions and their practical application to social work practice in North America. Western society has considered Asian newcomers as a 'model minority', which prevents Asian immigrants and refugees from successfully adapting to a new environment and to effectively settle down in a country (Crystal, 1989). Along with a lack of culture-specific studies on Asian newcomers, the myth of the 'model minority' has caused society to overlook the severity and gravity of social problems in the Asian communities, including family violence, alcohol/substance abuse, poverty, and under/unemployment (Subramanian & Takeuchi, 1999; Yun, 2008).

One unique cultural aspect commonly identified in Asian¹ families is family relations and specifically, 'gender relations'. With respect to 'gender relations' in Asian immigrants and refugees, the North American literature commonly identifies problems and issues in terms of gender inequality, oppression, abuse, and domestic violence (Gelles, 1972; Martin, 1976; Schecter, 1982; Walker, 1979; Yick & Oomen-Early, 2008; Yun, 2008). The Asian culture is not homogenous: nonetheless, gender-based studies, such as violence against women, show certain common characteristics within the diverse Asian cultural traditions and customs. A study on Asian family violence in Massachusetts found that Cambodian respondents generally believed that women had no right to divorce and should not leave an abusive husband (Yoshioka, Dang, Shewmangal, Chan, & Tan, 2009). They also found that Vietnamese respondents generally believed that a husband was the home ruler with the right to discipline his wife and that wives deserved beatings (Yoshioka et al., 2009). Other studies show that 1) Asian women are more likely to be held responsible for marital problems (Caplan, 1987) and that 2) Asian women report that they would 'talk softly' and/or 'do nothing' (D'Avanzo, Frye, & Froman, 1994, p. 72). Furthermore, male domination in Asian family decision-making, family conflicts arising over changing family norms and values, and patriarchal beliefs play an important role in domestic abuse (Bui, 1999). Additionally, some prominent Korean cultural factors and family values may influence the development of attitudes supportive of family violence (Rhee, 1996). Lee (1997) suggests that Asian American subgroups share certain common characteristics originating from agricultural backgrounds such as

Buddhism and Confucianism. According to Rozman (1991), Confucian civilization is coessential with the East Asian region.

In other words, the literature on gender-specific problems in the Asian communities can be explained by a certain cultural commonality imbedded in their lifestyle, their ways of thinking, their behavior, and their relationships with others. The author hypothesizes that Confucianism infuses such Asian cultural norms as respect for authority, hierarchy, family dependence, and role expectations based on age, gender, and social class.

It is beyond the scope of this article to illustrate all the principles of Confucianism. Instead, this article aims to add a relevant dimension and a critical perspective to the current knowledge on Confucianism by highlighting the most obvious oppressive practices toward women. First, the author will introduce general characteristics of Confucianism, its philosophical tenets, and its evolution from gender-neutral concepts to gender-specific social norms. Second, the author will identify gender-specific practices toward women from the teachings of classical Confucian texts. The Chinese footbinding tradition and female infanticide will be introduced as examples of gender-based oppression. Hopefully, these efforts will help readers understand how the misinterpretation of Confucianism promoted hierarchal relationships between men and women and, as a result, dramatically affected the latter's attitudes and behavior. Helping-professionals, in particular, need to understand these disparaging and unfavorable social and cultural practices and their influence on gender-based oppression in order to provide culturally sensitive services to new Asian immigrants and refugees.

Confucianism Ideology

For more than 2500 years Confucianism has been one of the most predominant social norms, political ideologies, cultural traditions, educational systems, and ethical standards to have influenced the thought and behavior of people in East Asia. Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) conceived of this system of moral wisdom in the 'Spring and Autumn Period' (春秋時代; 770 BCE–476 BCE) in ancient China. This system, now known as Confucianism, is primarily a Chinese tradition but its influence has spread throughout East Asia. Since its inception it has been formulated, adapted, and transformed through interactions with other schools of religion and philosophy such as Legalism, Monism, Daoism, Buddhism, etc. (Yao, 2000). Confucian intellectualism, philosophy, and religious spirit have penetrated all strata of society, influencing political, social, economic, religious, and cultural life in China, Korea, and Japan, and even other distant areas such as Vietnam and the Southeast Asian countries (Yao, 2000). According to Elman, Duncan, and Ooms (2002), Confucian *rushu* (儒術: repertoire) shaped the state and the society of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in diverse ways and at different levels of application:

From elite and popular education to the natural and religious-like domains, which included medicine, calendrical science, and the worship of ancestral spirits, Confucian

techniques not only informed the well-known domains of government and kinship relations, but they were also flexible enough to penetrate and inform cultural and biological reproduction, as well as the domains of the body and physical pain. (p. 5)

The central doctrine of Confucianism encompasses goodness, benevolence, consideration, humanity, and kind-heartedness. Related teachings emphasize such qualities as loyalty to government, respect for authority, reciprocity, self-cultivation, and neighborliness. During the Han dynasty (漢朝; 206 BCE–220 CE) the government adopted Confucianism as state doctrine and incorporated it into the official education system. Despite the dynamic and harmonious philosophical aspects of Confucianism, the patriarchal ideology was gradually institutionalized in society. Confucian family ideals about men's domination over women was expanded and further codified from the end of the Han (漢朝; 206 BCE–220 CE) to the Tang dynasty (唐朝; 618–907), a period in which the continuous existence of a strong central state system formulated kinship practices and promoted male-dominated social norms (Johnson, 1983).

One of the most important concepts of Confucianism as it relates to gender is the *yin-yang* (陰-陽)² binary. 'Yin (陰)', etymologically, means the shady side of the mountain and 'yang (陽)' means the sunny side (e.g. Rubin, 1982). The *yin-yang* relation is a cosmic concept that is cyclic, complementary, and correlative, but not oppositional and contradictory (Rosenlee, 2006). The *yin-yang* binary was not intended to signify any human relations (gender) or political ethics but the harmony of human nature (Raphals, 1998). This complementary binary force was used to systematize various knowledge realms such as astronomy, medicine, and divination to explain the overall mechanism of the natural and the human worlds as a contingent system that constantly balances changing situations and circumstances (e.g. Schwartz, 1985). The harmonious nature of *yin-yang*, for example, is specified in such a way that 'the *yin* and the *yang* shine upon each other, cover up each other and govern each other' (Mair, 1998, p. 264). Rosenlee (2006) also explains that *yin-yang* is conceptually associated in such a manner that 'correlative binaries such as light-shade and warmth-cold must be situated in a continuous spectrum in which the state of being cold and the state of being warm are always relative to one another' (p. 51).

From *yin-yang* (陰-陽) harmony to gender hierarchy

Complementary opposites of the *yin-yang* binary in the natural world are found at several branches of classical Chinese traditions, including medicine, science, martial arts/exercise, Daoist philosophy, and Buddhism. However, the concept of these natural *yin-yang* dualities in Chinese philosophy (e.g. Daoism) added moral, ethical, and social dimensions under the influence of Confucianism in the second century BCE (Taylor, 2005). Despite the complementary nature of the *yin-yang* union, a confucianized Chinese society consigned *yang* to male and *yin* to female. Rosenlee (2006) states that 'in the Han cosmology, the yang and the yin in some

passages are explicitly correlated with a hierarchical scheme where *tian* (heaven)/*yang/nan* (man) are privileged over *di* (earth)/*yin/nu* (woman)' (p. 55). According to one of the most important ancient Chinese classical writings such as *Wujing* (五經: Five Classics),³ the *yin* and *yang* analogies were described as hierarchal and gender-based. For example, *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露: Luxuriant Dew of The Spring and Autumn Annals) explicitly states that:

Things emerge and contract by following *yang*. All things end and begin by following *yang*. The rectitude of the Three Kings rose to its utmost in following *yang*. In this way it can be seen that they esteemed *yang* and demeaned *yin*. . . *Men, however, mean, are in all cases yang; women, however hobble, are all yin* [italics added]. . . Categories of evil all are *yin*, whereas categories of good all are *yang*; *yang* is a matter of virtue (*de* 德), *yin* is a matter of punishment (*xing* 刑). (Cited in Raphals, 1998, p. 163)

Shim (2001) also claims that Confucianism solidified an absolute hierarchical order and separation of the sexes requiring women to be in an inner or domestic sphere, and men in an outer or public sphere. Women were considered inferior to men in the patriarchal family system, whereas, boys were perceived as more valuable than girls. A song in the *Shijing* (詩經: Book of Odes) demonstrates how an infant boy was treated preferentially opposed to a girl, denoting their gender-based status and destiny in future life:

When a son is born, he is cradled on the bed,
He is clothed in robes, given a jade scepter as toy.
His lusty cries portend his vigour, he shall wear bright, red knee-caps,
Shall be the lord of a hereditary house.
When a daughter is born, she is cradled on the floor,
She is clothed in swaddling-bands, given a loom-whort as toy.
She shall wear no badges of honour, shall only take care of food and drink,
And not cause trouble to her parents. (Book of Odes, no. 189 cited by van Gulik, 1961, pp. 15–16)

The value of a clever woman is also depreciated in *Shijing*:

A clever man builds strong ramparts, a clever woman overthrows them,
Beautiful is the clever wife, but her heart as cruel as that of the owl.
Women with long tongues are harbingers of evil.
Disasters are not sent down from heaven, they originate in wives. (Book of Odes, no. 264, cited by van Gulik, 1961, p. 29)

Male superiority and female obedience are spelled out in a practical and detailed manner in Ban Zhao's *Nujie* (女誡: Admonitions for Women).⁴ According to *Nujie*, men and women should behave differently because *yang* (man) and *yin* (woman) have different natures. According to Swann (1968), the quality of *yang*

is rigidity that is linked to strength of men, whereas *yin*'s quality is yielding that is associated with gentleness and weakness of women. Thus, *Nujie* says that: 'Though a boy is born like a wolf, it is still feared that he may grow up to be like a worm, and yet though a girl is born like a mouse, it is still feared that she may grow up to be like a tiger' (originally Swann, 1968, p. 85, cited in Lee, 1994, p. 12).

Women as daughters, wives, and mothers

A woman was valued as a daughter, wife, and mother but not as an independent individual. The influence of Confucianism on women's social relations can be readily found in various classic Confucian texts, especially in *Nusishu* (女四書: Four Books for Women),⁵ the standard text, first compiled as a collection by Wang Xiang (1789–1852) in the mid-Qing (清, 1616–1912) (Rosenlee, 2006). According to Lee (1994), *Nusishu*'s teaching was so highly valued that both literate men and women started their education with these four books. The major goal of *Nusishu* was to inculcate the character model for 'wise and worthy wives and good mothers' promoted by the Confucian school in a feudal society (Mingqi, 1987, 'The Four Books for Women', para.1). Women were expected to be entirely subservient to men, and their greatest virtue was supposed to be self-sacrifice for the benefit of men (Morgan, 2001). Several chapter titles in each of the *Nusishu*, such as 'Humble Yielding', 'Bending in Submission', 'Serving the Husband', 'Filial Actions', and 'Being faithful to the Dead', specify the male-centered feudal standard and ideology advocating 'the male is venerable and the female debased' (Mingqi, 1987, 'The Four Books for Women', para.14). The importance of obedience as a daughter, mother, and wife was codified in the guiding principle of *Sam Jong* (三從: Three Submissions). *Sam Jong* states that a young girl should obey her father, a married woman should obey her husband, and a widow should obey her oldest son (e.g. Ho, 1990; Johnson, 1983).

The social norms of divorce further reveal women's subordinate status. Although women were not given any right to initiate divorce under any circumstances, men only needed parental approval and due reason to claim for divorce. The due reason for initiating divorce included several situations in which women were judged to have violated one of the seven decrees of proper behavior (Son, 2006). Such cases for expelling a wife [*Qichu* (七出; Seven Reasons for Expelling One's Wife)] included 'disobedience to the husband's parents, failing to bear a son, adultery, jealousy, contracting a harmful disease, malicious gossip, and theft' (Park & Cho, 1995, p. 125). Under such ruling a woman faced constant fear of being divorced and abandoned by her husband (Park & Cho, 1995). Specifically, the fact that a woman could be expelled from home because of not having a boy baby, while having no right to repudiate her husband (Verschuur-Basse, 1996), was an obvious example of gender-based discrimination in Confucian society.

According to Curtin (1977), the role of women reflected in Confucian tradition was described as follows:

Women have many roles in life: as daughters, they are indebted to do house chores (cook, clean, sew, wash after others, etc.); as wives, their most important obligation is to bear male children to perpetuate the family name... If she does not fulfill this task, she can be cast out of her husband's home, disgraced, and socially ostracized. It is only in her function as a breeder that she attains status in society. (p. 11)

These gender-based constraints toward women limited their choices when facing life crises (Elvin, 1984). Table 1 specifies that women in the Ming and Qing dynasties had to define their lives through kinship relationships, sacrifice themselves for parents and (deceased) husbands, and even choose death to fulfill the royal image of women infused by the male-centered Confucian tradition.

Footbindings and female infanticide: Gender-based oppression

In Confucian society, women were confined to the home and labored in such tasks as agriculture, weaving, cooking, and washing, while they were not permitted to get government jobs or engage in social activities (Mingqi, 1987). Women, especially upper-class women, were physically restricted to the boundaries of the house and often relegated to a certain part of the house. This social constraint is predominantly reflected in the traditional Chinese practice of footbinding.

Footbinding, a thousand-year-old Chinese institution, is believed to be one of the most brutal and inhumane practices affecting women (Johnson, 1983; Ko, 2002). Footbinding symbolizes the oppression toward women as a physical and social constraint. A young girl's feet were tightly bound by bandages so that her feet did not grow, and the bone structure would become deformed. Although the origin of footbinding is empirically unknown, mothers in the Song dynasty (宋朝; 960–1279) began to bind their daughters' feet to increase the opportunities in the marriage market because small feet had a strong erotic appeal to men (Ko, 2002). According to van Gulik (1961), women's small feet were considered as the most intimate part of her body, the sign of femininity, and the most potent representation of sex-appeal. Footbinding practice became fashionable after the 12th century when Neo-Confucianism was dominant and 'male chauvinism' was at its highest (Verschuur-Basse, 1996, p. 5). According to Davin (1976), the harmful consequences of footbinding such as pain, immobility, and disability were accepted in most of China (except in some areas where it was customary for women to work in the field as a normal part of childhood for girls at least until the 20th century). This social custom, despite being prohibited from 1911, was still practiced in some northern villages of China in the 1930s and only slowly extinguished (Davin, 1976; Snow, 1939, 1967). Johnson (1983) specifies that footbinding was an obvious social form of oppression originating from Confucian tradition that manifests cruel and vicious social restrictions against women, perpetrates women's submission to men

Table 1. Principal moral choices that might face a woman under the Ming and Qing

Crisis	Usual social practice	Virtuous actions	
		(A) In life	(B) In death
Death of mother	–	–	Commit suicide to serve mother as ghost
Marriageable age	Marry	Remain unmarried to care for aged parents	–
Parents oppose original fiancé (as mad or otherwise unfit)	Become engaged to new fiancé	Remain faithful to original fiancé	–
Death of fiancé: parents urge a new engagement	Become engaged to new fiancé	Move to dead man's family, marry his soul-tablet, care for his parents, adopt heir	Commit suicide and become dead man's ghost-wife in the underworld
Death of husband: parents-in-law press for a new marriage	Remarry	Become a faithful widow, completely isolated from the world	Commit suicide and become dead man's ghost-wife in the underworld
Threat of moral contamination (such as rape, slavery, or insults)	Stay alive (if only to care for others)	–	Commit suicide to preserve personal purity

Note: This table is modified from Elvin's (1984) original.

and family authority, immobilizes millions of Chinese women for their entire lives, and underscores women's value as 'goods for exchange' (p. 16).

A more recent example of systematic oppression toward women in China is well evinced by female infanticide practice, one of the by-products of the one-child policy that has been implemented since the late 1970s. To decrease the population growth as well as to diminish socio-economic and environmental problems in China, this family planning policy restricts married couples to having only one child, except for special circumstances, such as living in rural areas, members of ethnic minority groups, and couples who do not have any siblings (*BBC News*, 2000). Roughly 35.9 percent of the entire population in China is currently subjected to this policy (Xiaofeng, 2007) and at least 250 million birth were prevented since 1980 (*BBC News*, 2000).

Since the implementation of the policy, male favoritism and sexist attitude, deep-rooted in this Confucian country, have obviously been uncovered. Despite being illegal to perform sex identification and sex-selective abortion, pregnant women and their family screen the sex of the fetuses through ultrasound machines and abort females (Hvistendahl, 2010). According to National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, 2005), 'the sex ratio at birth has continually increased in China since the 1980's, from 108.5 in 1982 to 116.9 in 2000' (p. 18). 'In some areas, 135.6 males are born per 100 females' (NBSC, 2005, p. 18). By 2030, the number of men is expected to outnumber that of women by 30 million (Hvistendahl, 2010). The unprecedented oppressive practice and trend of female infanticide in China has immeasurable negative social implications not only on gender imbalance but also on perpetuating sexism and oppression against women in Chinese society. From the cruelties of foot binding to female infanticide practice as a sexist response to the family planning policy, women have been played as pawns of the male dominated culture and tradition.

Discussion

Presently, Confucianism in the West is a subject that involves only a minute group of scholars. For the most part, the major trend in Confucian studies in Western literature has been in translating the ancient texts, explaining Confucian tradition and philosophy, articulating the texts in chronological context, and more recently, in exploring its tenets and ideas from a critical and more liberating point of view. One of the difficulties of conducting Confucianism studies nonetheless is the highly philosophical and scholarly nature of Confucian works and being faced with the limited number of studies that have so far been published from a more contemporary and a more social work-based perspective. Because of the complexity of historical realities and diverse textual sources, simplified generalizations of Confucianism are very difficult and at best downright inadequate. In particular, this study includes a few limitations with regard to generalizing the influence of ancient Confucian ethics on East Asians' gender relations. Confucianism should not be treated as a monolithic entity because the so-called 'East Asian culture' can

be too conceptual and vague to use for a meaningful unit of analysis. Confucianism has evolved into various versions over time in different Asian regions and countries, in which indigenous and unique social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual factors coexist and related. In fact, 'East Asia is the only region in the world where the nations are divided into capitalist and socialist counties' (Jun, 1999, p. 194). Jun (1999) also specifies that Korea, China, and Japan have been very antagonistic to one another due to wars and colonization experience in recent history.

Furthermore, over the course of the modernization period (from the 19th to 20th centuries), Confucianism evolved differently reflecting unique circumstances of each Asian country: 1) domination of Christianity in contemporary Korea (Jun, 1999); 2) Japan's modernization through nationwide campaign for de-Confucianization and pro-Europeanization since Tokugawa Japan (1603–1867) (Jun, 1999); 3) the excesses of the anti-Confucian Cultural Revolution and socialism in China (Elman, 2002); 4) the impact of French colonization and Vietnamese Marxism (McHale, 2002); and 5) Singapore's ethnocentrism connected with Confucian ideologies in the midst of Islamic dominance (Chong, 2002).

In addition, commonalities of Confucian traditions among East Asians who newly migrated to the Western countries should be cautiously reviewed because the newcomers go through assimilation/acculturation into the myriad of so-called 'Western cultures'. This is particularly true because it is uncertain to what extent newcomers holding the Confucian culture are meaningfully influenced by Western values and ideologies in this current era of globalization. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize and acknowledge the vast differences that exist in contemporary Asian countries and also in Asian communities in the Western society.

In this article, the author introduced the basic tenets of Confucianism as an Asian-specific cultural norm and explored its debilitating sexist practices embodied in society. Especially, the author discussed how the complementary and harmonious *yin-yang* concept was transformed into the contradictory and oppositional *yin* and *yang* binary, which emphasizes the establishment and perpetuation of gender-based oppression. The examples of the classic Confucian texts and gender-specific practices provide scholars and helping professionals in the West with a valuable opportunity to more appropriately understand why Asian women and families develop common gender-specific attitudes and behaviour. Gender-distinctive teachings and lessons originating from the Confucian tradition were demonstrated to explain their connection on discrimination against women and oppressive behavior toward them. Gender relations in Confucianism were analyzed to be discriminatory in nature because the Confucian constraints are significantly related to discounting women's unique characters, rejecting their free thought/independence, and forcing them to follow the preordained destiny and orders of husbands and parents in daily life (Mingqi, 1987).

The author's argument is not to disparage Confucianism itself. Confucianism holds a unique value with profound intellectual legacies in East Asia, which has been accentuated by contemporary Confucianists. Confucianism fundamentally

aims to achieve harmony and humanism among people. Originally, the core elements of Confucianism emphasize close family ties, harmonious human relationships, self-cultivation, care ethics, respect and order. Unfortunately, the distortion of Confucianist thought did not discourage abuse and violence in the home; rather these values often contributed to denying, minimizing, and hiding the detrimental impact of oppression toward women. Moreover, there are no specific Confucian teachings documented to guarantee women's rights and protection in such a case a husband commits physical/emotional violence to his wife. The important point, here, is how people in the same period of time and place interpret its principles/notions, adopt them as modes of living, and practice them consciously and/or subconsciously in such a way as to perpetuate the oppression of women. In addition, the current literature also supports that the Confucian tradition of imposing inferior status on women resulted in broken relationships in domestic and societal contexts, rather than enhancing the harmony of relationships that Confucianism strived to achieve (Son, 2006).

Implications for social work practice

Family dynamic, yin-yang relations, empowerment, and strength perspectives

Identifying family interactions and family dynamics is crucial to social work practice. Confucian-based family structure is often identified as unequal and patriarchal. According to Lee (1989), the family is the primary element of society, and moral/ethical principles of Confucian tradition regulate the family function within the all encompassing realms of economic, social, and educational activities. Morales et al. (2010) exemplified these culture-driven traditions in the following way: in terms of *patriarchy* (a father is the leader of the family while mother is the nurturing caretaker), in reference to *gender hierarchy* (sons are more valuable than daughters), in respect to *obedience* and *care* (children are expected to obey their parents and elders, while the parents are responsible for raising, educating, and supporting their children). *Hierarchies*, *authority*, and *subordination* in families are obvious characteristics of the Confucian tradition (Berg & Jaya, 1993; Son, 2006; Yun, 2008). In a study that explains how Confucian traditions affected women's lives, Son (2006) specified that 'Confucianism has been a major influence in creating a subordinate role for women in Korea', which resulted in the detrimental effect on 'low self-esteem and a pervasive sense of shame' (p. 325).

In a practical sense, it is important to answer how social workers as community organizers and educators should address sexism and oppression against women in the family, in the workplace, and in social settings, as rooted in the traditional Confucian teachings in Asian American communities. What does the *yin-yang* binary suggest in those areas where social workers work with Asian American clients and families, especially those who are recent immigrant from Asian countries? Considering that the fundamental *yin-yang* binary signifies 'mutuality' and

'reciprocity' between genders and even 'cross-gender' and 'beyond gender' (Rosenlee, 2006, p. 50), social workers should encourage the clients to evaluate the true meanings of *yin-yang* relations and explore the development of women's rights within the proper and more enabling interpretation of Confucian social structure. This process helps the victims and survivors of gender-based oppression to reconstruct the value of *yin* (femaleness) as an equal partner with *yang* (maleness); therefore, rebuild the value, dignity, respect, and self-esteem.

Empowering clients and promoting strength-based practice can be facilitated through analyzing the Confucian-based equality ideas that are applicable to the humanism agenda including diversity and differences among people. Understanding the true nature of *yin-yang* principle as harmony and peace but not conflict and opposition, perpetrators as well as survivors/victims of gender-based oppression can re-evaluate the proper application of Confucianism as an ancient ethical theory. Furthermore, it can confirm the self-identity of women as independent human beings who interact with their individual partners reciprocally sharing equal power and rights. Social workers can help their clients confirm that the original *yin-yang* binary is aligned to human equality, self-cultivation, sharing, and collective harmony that is consistent with Confucius' original intent to achieve fair play and egalitarianism in human relations. Successful social work practice requires a more positive, life-nurturing approach to the family-centered culture of Asian newcomers, while eliminating any negativity that is imposed on survivors and victims of gender-based oppression. Leung and Cheung (2001) rightfully emphasize that helping professionals have to discourage the use of a deficit-oriented perspective, but more importantly have to strengthen individual integrity, foster positive family relations, and maximize the family support for the overall well-being of such clients. A strength-focused practice can help individuals in the family to take a more active role in establishing and promoting constructive support systems that are consistent with the original doctrine of Confucianism's *yin-yang* integration which appropriately emphasizes goodness, respect, consideration, humanity, propriety, reciprocity, neighborliness, and love.

Knowledge on Confucian norms, cultural competence, and migration-related factors

Social workers are obligated to provide culturally competent services to clients who have diverse cultural identities and varied cultural heritages. Acknowledging people's cultures while wrongfully labeling them as different, helping professionals have to understand that any intervention resulting from such negative stereotyping is inappropriate and even harmful to such clients (Kirmayer & Minas, 2000). In addition to identifying the cultural commonalities of a client, it is also important to recognize their individuality and uniqueness, such as generational factors,⁶ socio-economic status, migration experiences, and level of acculturation, which significantly influence newcomers' life. In particular, social workers have to

assess the changes in family relations after Asian families migrate to the new society. Short and Johnson (1997) argued that immigration should be seen not merely as an opportunity for personal discovery and development, but more importantly as a series of stressful life events to adjust to a new culture and environment. Male (father) dominant family relations are often challenged throughout the migration process. In addition to experiencing changes in socio-economic conditions (minority status, social isolation, subtle discrimination, and economic realities, etc.), all family members are exposed to different Western cultures such as equality between women and men, women's liberation, and individualism. Furthermore, acculturation and settlement experiences in the Western countries vary considerably. Uba (1994) specifies that people selectively maintain and/or discard certain values while experiencing immigration and settlement adjustment. Geographical and historical differences may hinder the conclusion that an ancient philosophy born in China is applicable to other Asian countries.

According to Kwon-Ahn (2001), after immigrating into the United States, a Korean man often feels less competent and less resourceful in language, social interaction, occupational mobility, employment, and new cultural norms, while his wife and children become more independent, liberal, and vocal than if they were living in their native environment. The major role formally classified for women as a breeder and care giver (Curtin, 1977) changes dramatically in the new society, their lifestyle becoming more autonomous and self-directed because they work outside the home to contribute to family economy, form a nuclear and independent family structure, and experience equal opportunity in a daily basis. Such freedom was not as feasible in their native country. This novel cultural experience may contribute to additional stress and conflict in terms of family relations. A number of ethnic specific studies have reported that the newly acquired wives' psychological liberation (e.g. equality between men and women and employment status) is linked to marital conflict among Asian immigrant families (Lee, 2005; Lim, 1997; Nah, 1993; Song, 1987). Yun (2008) also identified that the immigration-related stress can be a negative factor that influences physical and mental health for the immigrant families. Therefore, it is fundamentally essential for social workers to understand the acculturation, assimilation, and adaptation factors as well as the traditional Confucian norms which have been far removed from the Confucius' original intent and that have contributed to increased oppression toward Asian women.

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Notes

1. In this study, 'Asians' refers to immigrants and refugees who have originated from the people of the 'Chinese Cultural Circle' (漢字文化圈), who are linked by the history of Chinese politics, Chinese culture, and the common use of Chinese characters (past or current). These countries include East Asian countries (China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) and Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam and Singapore). The 'Chinese Cultural Circle' can be called the 'East Asian Cultural Circle' from the geographical point of view and the 'Confucian Cultural Circle', 'Rice-Eating Cultures', or the 'Chopsticks Cultural Circle' from a cultural point of view.
2. The dual cosmic forces of the *yin* and *yang* are understood to compose the universe in an unending chain. This philosophical system, based on a correlative dualism, is approved and utilized by both Confucianists and Taoists (see van Gulik, 1961).
3. *Wujing* (Five Classics) is a corpus of five ancient Chinese books of Confucianism: *Yijing* (易經: Book of Change), *Shijing* (詩經: Book of Odes), *Liji* (禮記: Book of Rites), *Shujing* (書經: Book of History), and *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露: Luxuriant Dew of The Spring and Autumn Annals).
4. Ban Zhao (45–120 CE), one of the most influential female Confucian philosophers and scholars, authored *Nujie* (女誡: Admonitions for Women) which significantly influenced every aspect of women's lives (Lee, 1994). There are a few English translations of the entire text of *Nujie*. See the works by Swann (1968) and van Gulik (1961).
5. *Nusishu* includes *Nujie* (女誡: Admonitions for Women), *Nulunyn* (女論語: Analects for Women), *Neixun* (內訓: Instruction for the Inner Quarters), and *Nufan jielu* (女範捷錄: Concise Selection of Model Women).
6. Generations can be grouped based on their diverse immigration histories and levels of acculturation: first-generation, 1.5 generation, second-generation, third-generation, etc. (Yun, 2008). For example, first-generation people are born, raised, and educated in their native country and immigrated to a country in North America. They usually maintain native culture and language after immigration. The 1.5 generation people are those who immigrate when they are teenagers (usually under age 18). They are English users and usually assimilate aspects of North American culture while keeping their native culture and language. Second-generation and third-generation people are first-generation's children and grandchildren, respectively; their culture can be considered North American. The language is often lost somewhere between the first and third generations.

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