

The Idea of Human Dignity Reconsidered: A Voice from Non-Western Perspectives

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The issue of human rights/ human dignity is a more complex issue when discussed in a non-western context. The ideas are deeply rooted in Liberal ideals that started in the western world during the 18-19th century. As such, it is not natural to non-western moral climate. Hence the conflict among the non-westerners themselves, as some of them see the liberal ideal as a liberation, and some see it as a dubious foreign influence. This paper considers the idea of human dignity. It seeks to understand the underlying assumption and philosophical climate that underlies the concept. It then looks into non-western culture, in this case the Thai culture, to see if there is a common ground that would give rise to harmonious agreement between Thai culture and western culture regarding human dignity and human rights. And it tries to do it in such a way that respects the dignity of the non-western culture as an autonomous, dignified culture, but at the same time respecting the way Liberalism has made life bearable for women, minorities, the powerless and the disenfranchised. With this paper the implication I hope to make is that non-western Feminist philosophers are in the double bind. We have an obligation as the people who fall outside the hegemonic norm to point out that the normalization of western ideal itself is a political act, for it implies unequal power between the North and the South. We also have an obligation to criticize our own "indigenous" culture for its racism, sexism, heterosexism and we can't help but using the language of western Liberalism to do it. I want to look into Thai culture to see if we have a way to use our own words and our own ideas to communicate the ideals we want. I think that, even though we are inspired by the Liberal ideals, we should be aware of the cultural specificity of it all. To use our indigenous ideas and language, we make a stand that our own culture is not morally illiterate; we can be better by being ourselves.

1. Human Dignity: forming the questions.

The United States' Declaration of Independence poetically states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights..." United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights also repeats the same theme; "all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights, (because) they are endowed with reason and conscience." It is unclear how the ideas that all humans are equal, free, and endowed with rights are "self-evident." The document itself states that "we hold these truths to be self-evident." That is to say, it is going to be assumed that these are the facts. Elsewhere in the world, for example in Thailand, the ideas of human rights and human dignity are taken by many as established ethical truths. This creates a friction between Thailand's own metaphysical understanding about human nature and western Liberal ideals. A prominent feminist scholar

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from the west once visited Thailand, proclaiming that she would never kneel down in front of our royals, because she would not be treated "as an animal." The same rhetoric was repeated again when a German television made fun of Thailand's recent coronation ceremony. The picture of Thai royals prostrating to their new king was compared to a picture of an animal crawling on the floor. Most of the Thais were roused by the authority, by the media, and by their own natural resentments to defend their culture and lash back angrily at westerners. Some of the Thais, however, readily agreed with the western liberal sentiments that to have someone prostrating on the floor or kowtowing is problematic. It is seen to be a sign of servitude, and together with other ritualistic and cultural aspects of the old society, it should be abolished all together. While the liberal clique wants to see equality outwardly established as a sign of recognition of inward equality among human persons, the conservative clique wants to brush off the idea of equality all together, seeing it as a foreign influence.

Zhang Qianfan, in the article "The Idea of Human Dignity in Classical Philosophy: A Reconstruction of Confucianism"² connected the idea of human dignity to Kant's assumption about pure reason and autonomy, and he connected the idea of human rights to Contractarianism, both of which can be traced back to enlightenment movement of the 17-18 century in the west. He claimed that Confucianism is consistent with the idea of human dignity, as Confucianism views humans as capable of learning and of cultivation, this makes them worthy of respect. Confucianism also promotes the idea that humans have moral duty to help each other cultivate; and although this idea of moral duty is gradational rather than impartial, it can ensure that every human being is a moral patient, that is to say, everyone is included in one's project of mutual cultivation.

Zhang's work is important to my own. Because Thai culture has 2 major components, one is Chinese culture, another is Theravada Buddhism from Indian *Pali*³ tradition. These 2 components mixed together inform much of our worldview, our discourse, our moral outlook.

Perhaps now it is a good time to carefully distinguish between "human dignity", what constitutes human dignity, and how human dignity is expressed in Thai cultures. One is to see if Thai culture has the idea at all, the second is to see the logic behind it, and the third is to understand the language (rituals, gestures) that expresses it.

While it is straight forward to decipher all three aspects of human dignity as a western concept, it is harder to do so within a Thai discourse. The very word itself, translated into Thai, sounds partly foreign, partly pretentious, and it invariably reminds one of the United Nations. What makes it natural in the west is the metaphysical background that sees humans as atomistic, rational (in a Kantian "pure reason" sense, not an Aristotelian "practical reason" sense),

² Qianfan Zhang, 2000.

³ Traditional language of Theravada Buddhism prominent in places like Thailand, Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka.

autonomous people. None of these can find a home in Thai culture. Not that Thai people don't see value in human life or human persons, but Thai culture doesn't support atomism, rationality, and autonomy the Kantian style.

2. What constitutes human dignity?

In the enlightenment tradition, as it is clearly stated in Kant's *the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*, human beings are unique in that they can reach the objective truth of universal moral principles (the principles of categorical imperative). In this work Kant intended to lay groundwork, once and for all, for future moral judgments and moral philosophy. It is inappropriate, according to Kant, that morality and moral judgments could be contingent upon one's particular contexts, inclinations, and accidents of nature. Let anthropologists study relative moral judgments of different people at different times. What he called "the metaphysics of moral" is something quite different. It depends solely upon one's pure reason, which is the reason untainted by any particularities or emotions. This is how one gets a glimpse of the ultimate truth. Only through ethics can we get this glimpse, and it can do this only because we are moral beings, which is the same as rational beings. Reason is endowed upon us by nature, for the sole purpose of enlightening us to the ultimate truth of morality⁴. That is why other things that are not a part of Kant's kingdom of ends (community of rational beings), are mere "things" while rational beings alone are called "persons". Reasons are "capable of being called up from the field of experience that in the consciousness of *its own dignity* reason despises these impulsions and is able gradually to become their master"⁵ (my emphasis). So, true to tradition, Kant followed in footsteps of the Greek moral realists, who were also dualists, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle⁶. Reason rises above experience to the field of pure contemplation. Virtue ethicist Simon Blackburn said of Kant, "(He) finds it offensive (that reason should be reformed by experience), contrasting the dim, moles' eyes fixed on experience with the eyes belonging to a being that was made to stand erect and look at the heavens."⁷ The imagery of a man standing erect, looking up at heavens were contrasted with animals, who lack this ability. Kant repeatedly used the words like reverence, respect, and dignity, to describe reason, the part of man that is his true self. It is clear then, that reason is linked to dignity and respectability, even reverence. The kind of reason worthy of these praises, are "pure" or "a priori" reason. Right and equality easily follows. For if someone is rational, his rationality puts him on equal terms with any other rational beings. Since reason alone is the ground for respect, and since reason transcends particular contexts of a person, there can be no distinction between the respectability that this person or that person commands. He also has a right, because he is not a "thing" (unlike the animals) to be used as means to achieve

⁴ Kant, 62-63.

⁵ Ibid, 78-79.

⁶ Although nowadays it is understood more and more that Aristotle might not be a hard dualist as Plato was, Aristotle was interpreted in a rationalistic and dualistic way for a long time.

⁷ Blackburn, 47.

other people's ends. He is his own ends. Thus a true Kantian would object to human torture, for example, on this ground.

2.1 Confucianism

Compared to Kant's rationality, Confucius' wisdom is constituted by particular, practical and empirical understanding.

"Zilu inquired, "On learning something, should one act upon it?" The Master said, "While your father and elder brothers are still alive, how could you, on learning something, act upon it?" Then Ranyou asked the same question. The Master replied, "On learning something, act upon it." Gongxi Hua said, "When Zilu asked the question, you observed that his father and elder brothers are still alive, but when Ranyou asked the same question, you told him to act on what he learns. I am confused-could you explain this to me?" The Master replied, "Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, and so I sought to rein him in." (Analects, 11:20-23)

Should we think that variations in Confucius' teachings merely show different training techniques the master employed to match different characteristics of his students? In other words, could there be a higher truth that is absolute, unchanging, and discoverable by human reason? Confucius scholars agree that *ren* is one of the key concepts in Confucius moral system. Even when Confucius defined *ren*, there are more than one definitions.

"Yan Hui inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren*). The Master replied, "Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative in one's conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model..."

Zhanggong inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren*). The Master replied, "In your public life, behave as though you are receiving important visitors; employ the common people as though you are overseeing a great sacrifice..."

Sima Niu inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren*). The Master replied, "An authoritative person is slow to speak...When something is difficult to accomplish, how can one but be slow to speak?" " (The Analects,12:1-3)

"Fan Chi inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren*), and the Master said, "Love others." " (The Analects, 12:22)

It is crucial to point out the particular (as contrast to the universal), the practical (as contrast to the Greek *episteme*, the theoretical), and the empirical (as contrast to Kant's *a priori*) in Confucianism. Because knowledge is a way of being and relating to one another, it is hard to imagine an autonomous "true self" that can reach transcendent truth. While Kant, and the

western world influenced by his ideas, value a self that is transcendent (to the point that Kant called it rational being, to emphasize not the whole of human but only a rational part of him), Confucius valued the wholesomeness of the way humans, in community, act and relate to one another, and how humanity relates to the world (thus *he* or harmony is emphasized.) Thus it is naturally followed in Kantian tradition, that there would be inalienable rights attributed to individual humans (Kantians then need to tackle the problems of humans with mental disabilities or humans who lack consciousness for a period of time, for example.) Dignity, reverence, respectability is also natural to all humans as rational beings. Each of them individually is dignified, revered, and respectable. Whereas Confucius' *junzi*, exemplary person (as Aristotle's *phronimos*, practically wise person) can be good or wise (good and wise imply each other) in contexts. It means she has the ability to discern the situation rightly, that is to say, to act and to perceive things in such a way that shows human-heartedness or good characters. A person cannot individually transcend her community to do this. As a piece of raw jade needs to be cut, filed, and polished by a jeweler, a human needs to be cultivated and polished by teacher, friends, community, state. Her moral accomplishment or her moral failure therefore is not merely her own, but a whole community's accomplishment or failure. The respectability, reverence, and dignity, though ascribed to her, are reflections of those qualities within her community. Confucius emphasized relationships in his moral education, a father and son cover up each other's mistakes (as in the case of stolen sheep, Analect 13:18), loyalty and conscientiousness within family and within the state (Analect 1:2, 1:6, 2:21, 4:18). The heart of these dialogues lies upon the fact that Confucius trusted (as Aristotle did) that the only way to cultivate a person, is to suggest to them the grander of a certain way to act and to be, and the pettiness of others. It is crucial to inspire people to be good. There is no logical argument that can be put to a person as rational being, to convince them that they should be good.

"The Master said: Governing with excellence (*de*) can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute" " (Analect, 2:1)

"Master Zeng said, "The exemplary person (*junzi*) attracts friends through refinement (*wen*), and thereby promotes authoritative conduct (*ren*)" (Analect, 12:24)

"The Governor of She asked about governing effectively (*zheng*), and the Master replied, "those near at hand are pleased, and those at a distance are drawn to you" (Analect, 13:16)

"The excellence (*de*) of the exemplary person (*junzi*) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend" (Analect, 12:19)

To "respect" the individual decontextualized and stripped from all other influences, assumes there is such a true self trying to break free from the material and the relationships. There is no such self in Confucianism. A self is always evolving, as a plant or a tree. It is a part of the environment, and cannot be understood without the environment. It would be out of

character for Confucian inspired society to talk about individual right and dignity. It's the wholesomeness (or wickedness) of community that shapes a person.⁸

2.3 Buddhist *Pali* tradition

It is clear that being born human is precious. Human life is precious. Uniquely so even compared to animal life and celestial life (of the gods and heavenly beings), because of the only reason, that conditions of human lives are conducive to learning and understanding the truth. No other inherent goodness or dignity apart from this practical benefit. Buddhist rhetoric doesn't glorify human birth but tends to warn those already born human to stop losing time not practicing, because if one lose time, who can tell what one would transmigrate to in the next life. Being human is therefore like a limited-time offer. Once expired, you lose the benefit. The point that a human can transmigrate into celestial being (which is seen as not conducive to learning and therefore not precious, despite the perks), or to animals, makes it impossible to make sharp dualistic distinction between humans and animals in Kant's language, "persons vs. things." Because there is a strong connection between all life forms (they transmigrate), it is absurd to revere a human being only to use her as an object (for example, to eat) once she comes back as a pig⁹. In terms of moral obligation, that is to say, the way Buddhists have moral considerations for sentient beings, it is exactly the same between the Buddhists and the Utilitarians. They seek to maximize happiness and minimize suffering, regardless of species. Buddhist language therefore doesn't make sharp distinction between life forms at all. In terms of compassion, the word "sentient beings", and never "humans" or even "rational beings" is used. When they talk about being human, the context is almost always a warning of passing time, a call for practice. To speak of human rights naturally sounds strange. There's no textual support as to why, if there is such thing as a "right" to anything, it should be selectively ascribed to only human and not to all sentient beings. In terms of dignity, humans generally are not the highest or the most prestigious in the worlds (though selected ones are, solely because of their levels of learning.) Another aspect of the human rights and human dignity rhetoric is the implication that all humans are equal (in Kantian tradition, as rational being) regardless of other particularities (race, gender, orientation.) Buddhist rhetoric readily endorses equality for all sentient beings, not only humans, in the sense that they all are moral patients, equal in one's consideration. But there is no way to use Buddhist rhetoric to express the idea that only all humans are equal, and that they are equal simply by the fact of being humans. Buddhist *Pali* texts repeatedly make distinction between those who are still learning and those who have completed the learning, as in *Sekha Sutta*.¹⁰

⁸ I don't mean to suggest that a person doesn't have autonomy at all. Confucius thought that we choose, and we transform, but individual and the environment mutually transform each other. Thus, the Confucian autonomy is different from Kantian autonomy.

⁹ Theravada Buddhists do eat meat, this only shows their inconsistency between believes and practice. It by no means indicates that animals can be used as things according to the canon.

¹⁰ The *Tripitaka* (Royal Edition), Book 19 (*Sutta Pitaka, Sang Yut Nikaya*).

Further distinctions are made between those who are on different levels of learning, starting from householders who possess various levels of awareness, to monks who achieve different levels of realization. The idea that the wise and good would command equal respect as the fool is as ludicrous in Buddhist rhetoric as in Confucius or Ancient Greek rhetoric. All sentient beings have equal weight as one's moral patients, because their pains are the same. All rational beings, if one insists on using such word, do not command equal respect, because there is no reason to respect mere unrealized potentials. Moreover, if one insists on respecting potentials, all sentient beings have that potential to attain enlightenment. It is therefore, very hard for Buddhists (as Buddhists) to accept the concept of human dignity and of equality of respect. Buddhist cultures need to switch to foreign tongue to speak Liberalism, that is why Thai words involving Liberalism sounds foreign. If language and thoughts are interconnected, one can see how Liberalism is, for good or ill, blatantly a foreign influence.

3. How to express respect for human dignity?

The question why we should respect, is different from the question how we should express the respect. The latter has to do with language, conventions, common practices. It also has to do with physical influences such as climate and architecture. Thai people in Thai traditional houses which are light, breezy, wooden, sit on the floor because it is cooler on wood floor than in heavy, thick, fluffy furniture. The way they sit on the floor is actually the opposite of how some westerners describe, it is far from barbaric. Thai people, like Japanese people, learned how to be graceful and refined on the floor. The way they move, sit, crawl, is choreographed to showcase gracefulness. This works in a class conscious Thai society to distinguish the higher class from the lower class. In days gone by, one can tell a person's "breeding" from their distinctive mannerism¹¹. It is thus poignant to the Thais, that all Thai people who sit on the floor are seen by some foreigners, more powerful than they are, as "animal-like." Some Thais want to "liberate" the oppressed class by abolish the tradition of prostrating on the floor. Although this suggestion can successfully shade some light on the problematic classism in the country, it inadvertently condones colonialism because it subscribes uncritically to the hegemonic viewpoint, seeing this viewpoint as universal rather than as culturally specific.

Roland Barthes, in his influential book, *Mythology*, showed that meanings ascribed to cultural phenomenas are infused with ideology. It is neither natural nor universal. It is a "myth", that sitting on the floor is animal-like, or prostrating is subservient. Not because it is untrue as opposed to what is objectively true. But because it is arbitrary and culturally specific, while passing as natural and universal. In his book, Barthes pointed out that the meaning ascribed to social phenomena is infused with bourgeois ideology¹². Edward Said, in his ground breaking,

¹¹ There is a Thai proverb that says, one's dialect betrays one's origin; one's physical manner betrays one's breeding.

¹² Barthes, 10.

Orientalism, pointed out that meaning ascribed to things "oriental"¹³, is infused with colonial ideology. Barthes took cultural phenomena as "literature", because each phenomena has meanings behind it. To see prostrating people as representing unequal, oppressive, classist regime is one possible translation. However, I wish to see how cultural phenomenas involving human dignity are translated, explained, understood, in native discourses. We now turn to Confucius and the *Pali* text.

3.1 Confucianism: *li* as theatre.

It is apparent that Confucius was suspicious of people with "glib speech." Wisdom in Confucian discourse is expressed through the character of the master's ideal student, Yan Hui. And the most prominent characteristic of Yan Hui is perhaps his modesty. It is markedly different from what intelligence is shown in western discourse. In philosophy, a discipline founded on "the love of wisdom", clarity, articulateness, validity of one's logical arguments, are of essence. From the beginning of philosophy, Plato chastised his interlocutors for not being precise enough. Plato's interlocutor Euthyphro, for example, was criticized for giving examples rather than precise definitions of what piety is¹⁴. We see the contrast in Confucius' Yan Hui

"The Master said: I can speak with Yan Hui for an entire day without his raising an objection, as though he were slow. But when he has withdrawn and I examine what he says and does on his own, it illustrates perfectly what I have been saying. Indeed, there is nothing slow about Yan Hui" (Analect, 2:9)

It is telling that Yan Hui himself was modest about his accomplishments and skills. Once instructed by the master, he replied:

"Although I am not clever, allow me to act on what you have said" (Analect 12:1)

One cannot understand and appreciate Yan Hui properly without realizing that knowledge in Confucius, is not the kind that transcends particular world and transports oneself to higher truth. *A priori* and individualistic, as Kantian knowledge is, it can neither be found in experience nor can it be found in community. This is why rigorous logic makes sense in western philosophy, it weeds out imprecise thinking and it weeds out contaminating influence from society or from one's upbringing; all those influences that make for a subjective understanding of the universe rather than objective understanding. As western philosophy from the outset wanted to go from the "appearances" to "reality", it relies on one's reasoning and elevates the reasoning to the status of something pure and detached from other parts of the self (in fact, reason is the real self while other parts are not.) Because the whole project of Confucius is itself a dialogue, not in the sense that each person uses her logic to correct mistakes of the others, but in the sense

¹³ Said, 7.

¹⁴ Plato, "Euthyphro."

that each person inspires one another to a common idea of beauty, the point that Yan Hui comported himself well counted as intelligence, for it is inspiring although (or perhaps because) it is not argumentative.

"The Master said, "What is the use of eloquence? A person who disputes with a ready wit often earns the enmity of others. I cannot say whether or not he is an authoritative person, but what need is there for eloquence?" (Analect: 5;5)

People well versed in western philosophical method are in danger of interpreting the numerous passages in the Analect that points to deference to one's parents (Analect 1:6, 1:11, 13:19) and to respect of elders and the powerful (Analect: 9:16, 14:43), as a sign of servitude. This would be a mistake, for Confucius' harmony doesn't mean conformity and blind conservatism (Analect 13:23). Even though children should not argue with their parents, and should even cover for the parents in case they steal some sheep, it is because only then can inner reformation occur. A sense of shame (which is much emphasized in the Analect¹⁵) can only occur uncoerced. When a child maintains his or her own moral integrity while choosing to honor prior commitments to parents, parents would feel shame. Because there is no moral ultimate truth outside of community, the shame comes from within the context of relationships. This is why Confucius was suspicious of people who are argumentative and potentially disruptive. It is important to note that those in power need to be deserving of their status, the powerful need to be tolerant (Analect 3:26) while the younger and less powerful need to be deferential (Analect 1:6). Being deferential in this rhetoric does not mean being subservient. It means being in the process of mutual cultivation. Barbarians would not be deferential, they are outside of networks of mutual cultivation (until a *junzi* happens to be among them, then even barbarians will be inspired.) The critical point here is that, to judge a culture that values hierarchy and deference as oppressive is to greatly over-simplifying the issue. The act of judging such culture as oppressive is itself an unfair act. It marginalizes a culture merely for not sharing western ideal of dignity. In fact, *li*, ritual, or manners, the way people act, talk, comport themselves, have multiple meanings and not just one. In the case of Confucius as in the case of traditional Thai culture, being deferential and self-effacing shows your high status rather than low status. Here ML Panasda Diskul, a direct descendent of King Rama the 5th talked of how his grandfather who was prince Damrong Rajanuphap taught his family

"Distinguishing features of Thai people are self-effacement and humility. These characteristics only raise a person up higher in the eyes of others. Only fools don't recognize this fact"¹⁶

¹⁵ See for example, 13:20 "Zigong inquired, "What must one be like to be called a scholar-apprentice (*shi*)?". The Master replied, "Those who conduct themselves with a sense of shame."

¹⁶ Panasda Diskul, 15.

We need therefore to view the issue of humility and deference as a more complex issue, and we need to be aware that there are multiple layers of interpretation when it comes to social phenomena. Interpretation is always a political act, as Barthes and Said remind us. Even if we want to interpret a social phenomena through our familiar hegemonic concept, we should act as Richard Rorty, an American philosopher, once suggested, before we judge someone, we should first learn how that person describe the situation to him or herself. We should not view self-effacing mannerism as lack of human dignity, we should see it as the opposite, for that is what it intended to show. Because a choreographed physical gesture cannot be performed by the uninformed or uncultivated (the outsider), it comes to show how the person is learned or cultivated, and thus ultimately it means a person has a place within a culture or a group.

3.2 Buddhist *Pali* tradition: be ironists.

Another influence on Thai culture in terms of the expression of human dignity is of course, Buddhist *Pali* tradition. Even though Buddhists don't often see it this way, they must ultimately admit, that all of Buddhist prescriptions on social obligations and social relationships are not the transcendent truth that is the heart of the discipline. All the social harmony is so that people (in fact, all of sentient beings) could be reasonably comfortable in an essentially frustrating world. Those who are, at present, humans (they transmigrate) should take advantage of it and practice. In order to practice, one needs to have the time and energy, this is the reasoning behind the fact that Buddhist *Pali* tradition can be seen as conforming to the ways of the world, except for some ways of the world that blatantly cause suffering like killing or harming sentient beings (which Buddhists cannot do.) In this paper I would like to suggest that the casual attitude towards inequality between classes (although once a person enters monastic community, they are treated equally irrespective of their classes) are due not to the fact that Buddhists value deference towards power, but the opposite. Kings are but birds or fish life-times ago, not to mention beggars and paupers. And even though they are now kings, it is still to be seen how they would do in this life, the result of which determines whether they go back to being birds and fish in their future. With this metaphysics there are two attitudes that follow. First is the recognition that they deserve to be king, unless they violate the moral rules for kings.¹⁷ The second is that Buddhists don't take worldly power seriously¹⁸, Buddhism is an other-worldly system¹⁹. An interesting point is that although Buddhists don't take social status and power (other than moral authority) seriously, they are meticulous about how to conduct worldly affairs. For

¹⁷ Buddhist canon prescribes 10 rules for kings, consisting of generosity, tolerance, gentleness, and such. The implication is that those who do not adhere to the rules are not justified in their power.

¹⁸ In a classic commentary on *pali* text, "The Buddha Dhamma" by the great Phra Promkunaporn (Payuth Paytto), it is clearly stated that Buddhists should not take powers of gods seriously, for these things are trivial, we can assume this applies to powers of kings. (Phra Promkunaporn, 946.)

¹⁹ Not in the sense that it doesn't prescribe ethical guidelines for the living in the world, but in the sense that the ultimate goal is to transcend attachments to all worldly concepts, including the concepts of "good" and "bad".

example, there are basic rules for maintaining society²⁰: generosity, respectful speech, helpfulness, constancy in dealings with one another. There are prescriptions as to how to treat people with different statuses and with different relations towards oneself. The most practical guide is perhaps the teaching on the "6 directions." The idea is that people and beings relate to oneself in 6 directions, and one should treat them accordingly. As a child to parents, one should take care of parents' wellbeing, take over their projects, dedicate merits to them once they pass on, etc. As parent to a child, one should point the child to the right direction, give education, give inheritance, etc. As a student to teacher, one should pay respect, spend time with, diligently receive teachings, etc. As husband and wife, as friends, as master and retainer or boss and employee, there are different sets of obligations one has towards others.²¹ This seems to indicate that Buddhism endorses hierarchical structure (the 6 directions teaching indicates who is higher or lower than oneself). It can be seen as problematic (though surprisingly benign considering ancient Indian culture) as in case of husband and wife. A wife is to be managing household, be generous to husband's relatives, faithful, safe-keeping wealth and property, diligent. A husband is to be honoring the wife, not belittling her, faithful to her, he is to give her full responsibility of household and to give her ornamental gifts on occasions.²² It is fair to say that, while Buddhism does not question established hierarchical structure, and this can be seen as an endorsement, Buddhists see this as they see their obligations to gods (make offerings, etc.) It is not substantial. The social structure cannot be substantial in metaphysical sense because ultimately the self is a mistaken concept and so there is no other way of seeing social relationships (hierarchical or otherwise) as anything metaphysical and real, not to mention the transmigration which makes jokes out of stern hierarchical ritualistic protocols. Buddhists are therefore non-disruptive of social protocols not because they are subservient, but because they see through the façade of power display. If those in power are abusive (act in such a way that cause unnecessary suffering), then change needs to be made. But if the powerful can be reined in with religious rules regarding the ruler's proper conducts towards the subjects, it is not a lack of human dignity to be a subject. Servitude happens when one mistakes hierarchical structure as real, Buddhists are ironists. So while Confucians seek to preserve social harmony in order to cultivate human beings, Buddhists are non-disruptive because they can't be bothered.

4. The common ground.

So far I have tried to make a point that the idea of dignity is translated differently into practice by different cultures. Social practices are interpreted differently from east to west. Once we have established this fact, we are free to ask, with native tongue, how can we talk about human dignity and human rights? First of all the "right talk", as Zhang Qianfan pointed out, is puzzling in society that maintains metaphysical assumptions that personhood is relational and not

²⁰ Phra Promkunaporn, 604.

²¹ Phra Promkuniporn, 734.

²² Ibid.

atomistic. So we have to talk of obligations to one another instead of talking rights. Zhang himself pointed out the potential of Confucianism to do this, and I fully agree. Take the issue of Patriarchy that plaques China throughout history, one needs to realize that there is nothing in Confucius teaching that prevent contemporary woman to be a *junzi*. In fact, I witnessed one such *junzi* and was cultivated by her in a philosophy department. Because Confucianism is responsive and evolving by nature, it shouldn't be seen as static and dogmatic as it sometimes is.

The Master said: "Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new - such a person can be considered a teacher" (Analect 2:11)

What Confucius objected to, was not the reform, but the reform without root, the reform without realizing important aspects of the old. Since one's sense of self is continuous with one's sense of history, to be uprooted is tragic. In contrast to western enlightenment ethics, where to not be uprooted is considered tragic. We can talk Confucius and be feminist, because circle of care and cultivation in Confucian ethics is in fact hospitable to feminist ideas of caring and togetherness, and can be seen as an antidote to the enlightenment's disinterested and unfeeling discourse. In this case, Confucian feminists would be in good company because Aristotle, in his critique of Plato, believed that ethics has to take into accounts all the "appearances" (history, traditions, common practice) as well as the emotions which are themselves cognitive and heuristic²³. While Confucius urged his students to study poetry, Aristotle did the same, and for the same reason. Seeing this rich potential in Aristotelian ethics, many feminists identify themselves as Aristotelian feminists.

Buddhism itself is also hospitable to feminist ideas. If feminists aim to elevate sufferings of women, there is no logical way for a Buddhist to not be an ally. But more importantly, as Rita Gross pointed out in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy* and more recently *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, Buddhism cannot be misogynistic and be consistent with itself. For gender is a social construct, together with other illusions, it is to be deconstructed and therefore cannot exist as substantial aspect of a being (it fact, there are no such things as "beings" for that matter.)²⁴ Any social practices that are not conducive to the realization that all attributes are non-substantial, are wrong and harmful. Buddhism is androgynous at heart and cannot support Patriarchy. The trick is to negotiate between the ironist attitude and the activist attitude. Seeing that so many women suffer, and their potentials in human lives wasted, Buddhist feminists can legitimately seek support from all other Buddhists. Even though gender is ultimately unreal, suffering can be real enough, and Buddhists have to pay attention to that.

²³ See for example, *EN* 1098b20-23, 1145b1-10, 1139a20-25.

²⁴ Gross, 84-85.

5. Conclusion

I hope I have shown that to impose western interpretation on social practice and social protocol of different culture is harmful and not beneficial. Aristotle pointed out in his *Nicomachean ethics* that majority of people cannot be all wrong. We shouldn't accept every common practice in society uncritically, neither should we dismiss everything out of hand. We must "review the old to realize the new." Seeing that to promote human wellbeing in foreign tongue doesn't work, and it backfires for its dubious paternalistic westernization, we need to go back to see how to be true to our cultures and understand how things are interpreted in those cultures. Human dignity is an excellent entry point to this, because to see what is offensive and what is not, involves interpretation. And interpretation always implies the politics as well as the metaphysics.

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