The Construction of Gender Roles and Stereotypes of Women in Modern China's Cities by Confucianism's Legacy

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On a lush green mountainside surrounded by rolling hills as far as the eye can see, a young woman stands accompanied by her partner, a proud and imposing dog. The pair travels across the countryside, foraging for new ingredients, receiving goods from fellow villagers, and returning home to prepare a meal for their family. In a sweeping courtyard flourishing with flora of every color, a different young woman sets out with childlike vigor to collect an assortment of beautiful flowers. She soon returns home to begin preparing a filling spread for her grandmother, craft an intricate pink crown using the petals just gathered, and pair it with an elaborately embroidered dress of her own design. These two women are Dianxi Xiaoge (滇西小哥) and Li Ziqi (李子柒), two social media influencers based out of China's rural countryside with massive online followings. While the lifestyles they portray appear idyllic, their videos display representations of traditional gender roles that have been constructed and reinforced over time through an attention towards Confucian values within the context of the family, particularly in the setting of an idealized pastoral lifestyle. The aforementioned Confucian values, I argue, have permeated much farther than just the Chinese countryside though, and influence perceptions of women in China's cities, as well. I would like to posit that Confucianism's legacy, as seen in modern China's major cities, continues to perpetuate traditional constructions of gender roles and conceptions of a female stereotype that is characterized as a family-oriented entity, not suitable—or, at least, not equal to men—in the professional and academic spheres. This manner in which Confucianism's legacy operates consequently requires women to flee their respective familial institutions in order to effectively undermine these traditional Confucian constructions of femininity. I will now proceed to define the Confucianism being discussed in this paper before reading into the scholarly conversation surrounding the legacy of Confucianism and its manufacturing of gender roles and stereotypes for women in the cities of the modern Chinese

state. I will then provide my analysis of Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi in order to support my argument and contribute to the overarching conversation.

We can first begin by providing a general definition of Confucianism, describing the ideology as a system of teachings (philosophical and ethical) that was created by Confucius and further developed over time by his disciples and through dissemination. The ideology emphasizes values of benevolence (仁), ritual propriety (礼), filial piety (孝), knowledge (智), and more, all of which create a proper foundation for the upholding of the five relationships (father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend) that would promote a more harmonious and stable society. This understanding of Confucianism closely adheres to the system of thought outlined in Confucius' *Analects*, but has evolved over the past two millennia. Confucianism is now typically constructed in a manner more befitting of modern-day society, which appears in recent developments like Confucius' relative deification within the realm of education and in granting good fortune for exam-takers. While constructions like the deified Confucius exist, many other values from ancient Confucianism are still followed closely, as well as elements of the five relationships, which can be observed in their deep permeation into societies like that of the modern Chinese state.

In order to explore this scholarly discussion concerning the legacy of Confucianism in China's major cities, we must now look to how this legacy manufactures the role of women in the institution of the family, and how this fabricated role generates a stereotypical image for women in the context of family. Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, in her *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*, explains that Confucianism's presence as the state ideology of China is not the source of women's oppression. Confucianism's potential connection "with gender oppression in everyday life must be found instead in the institution of the family where

the Confucian emphasis on the familial virtue of filial piety, the continuity of the family name, and ancestor worship are more of a way of life."[1] Rosenlee identifies and argues that "the convergence of these three cultural imperatives reinforced in Confucian familial virtue ethics—the continuity of the family name, filial piety, and ancestor worship— serves as a powerful basis for generating, sustaining, and justifying the social abuse of women."[2] Looking at the context of the family as an institution more broadly, Qiong Xu elucidates in her *Mapping the Chinese Contexts: Cultural Influences and Social Changes* that every member of a family (fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters) has clearly defined roles and corresponding duties.[3] While it is a father's responsibility to raise his son until the son inherits his role, a mother's "main duty is to 'be married to a good provider for herself, to bear children for his family and hope these children will be successful'(Cheung, 1996, p. 46)."[4] This structuring of the family places the father at the center and displaces the agency and importance of women in this institution, most particularly the daughters who are supposed to marry out of the family.[5] We will now shift the focus of the conversation to how Confucianism's influence in constructing these gendered roles and this stereotype of the family-oriented wife and mother extends to cities.

1. Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Ithaca, United States: State University of New York Press, 2006), 121, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/davidson/detail.action?docID=3407862.

2. Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 122.

3. Qiong Xu, "Mapping the Chinese Contexts: Cultural Influences and Social Changes," in *Fatherhood, Adolescence and Gender in Chinese Families*, ed. Qiong Xu, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 3, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-46178-0_1.

4. Xu, "Mapping the Chinese Contexts," 4.

5. Xu, "Mapping the Chinese Contexts," 4.

As Xinyan Jiang, author of *Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts*, discusses, within the professional and academic spheres, it is atypical for women to have opportunities for success comparable to that of their male peers and for women to receive the same recognition for their accomplishing of achievements equal to that of their male peers/coworkers.[6] This trend has been influenced by the stereotype of a woman that has been crafted after millennia of Confucian thought, which has left lasting detrimental and inequitable effects on professional and academic women in modern China. In *Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity? Firm-Level Evidence from China*, Xingqiang Du discusses how women's role shifted outside of the traditional family sphere and gradually into the social sphere after the PRC's founding, but after new reforms and policies in 1978, "women's social status has suffered a decline to varying degrees and further gender inequality and discrimination toward women in labor market include "lower income levels, a lower level of occupation, forced early retirement, a higher proportion of laid-off, and gender discrimination in hiring" (Summerfield 1994)."[7] Du contends that—within the professional context of firms—a strong Confucian atmosphere decreased the likelihood of women's promotion to leadership positions, and, consequently, lessened gender diversity on firms' boards.[8] He states that, "[w]ith regard to women's promotion in Chinese enterprises, Confucianism's negative influence brings out that women directors or women top managers are employed only as tokenism, rather than critical mass."[9] Utilizing these scholarly voices, we can

6. Xinyan Jiang, "Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (June 2009): 229, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.2009.01516.x.

7. Xingqiang Du, "Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity? Firm-Level Evidence from China," *Journal of Business Ethics: JBE* 136, no. 2 (June 2016): 400, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2508-x.

8. Du, "Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity?," 411.

9. Du, "Does Confucianism Reduce Board Gender Diversity?," 403.

begin to observe how Confucianism's legacy appears in creating conceptions and stereotypes of women that negatively impact their treatment in the professional sphere by men. Patriarchal conceptions of women as family-oriented existences perpetuate gender inequalities, while men continue to dominate the social, political, and professional spheres as women enter them under traditional Confucian pressures. Rosenlee provides a valuable voice on Confucianism's application in this particular context, as she explains that "[o]nce a philosophy that emphasizes role-playing and hierarchal distinctions among people combines with a social context in which women's inferiority is taken for granted, this philosophy will serve the oppression of women."[10] When looking towards professional women in modern China's cities—as long as Confucianism continues to provide influence and the workplace stays dominated by men, taking this controlling position for granted—it seems that gender roles will maintain their current unequal qualities.

The city of Shenzhen offers a relatively contrasting image though, and may provide evidence of these gender roles' barriers' deconstruction to a certain degree. Shenzhen has undergone rapid growth in recent decades and now remains as a beacon for many migrant workers, in particular, many young women.[11] Ching Kwan Lee discusses in her *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women*, "[t]hese rural young women came for the no less important goals of escaping from parental control and various familial responsibilities…. Becoming long-distance migrant workers allowed these women to maintain physical distance from their families while sending cash income home as a substitute or compensation for undesirable familial

10. Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 47.

11. Ching Kwan Lee, Gender and the South China Miracle : Two Worlds of Factory Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 68, https://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=6849&site=ehost-live.

obligations."[12] Shenzhen, because of its nature of attraction to these specific young women, has produced and offered an environment for young women where traditional Confucian-influenced gender roles and stereotypes are not so much as absent as they are avoided. By avoiding for long enough though, and continuing to defy their families' and society's expectations, these gender roles and stereotypes are gradually worn down and become, at the very least, less applicable to the women who subvert them. Although a seemingly hopeful objective, Shenzhen remains as a problematic indicator of the home environment and the pressures of its Confucian values that these young women choose to venture away from. Utilizing the overarching scholarly discussion, I will now transition into my analysis of two Chinese social media influencers whom I argue participate in the maintenance of the Confucian-influenced gender roles and stereotypes present in the institution of the family and in the professional and academic spheres of China's major cities.

Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi each have an enormous presence on social media in both China and overseas, with two's collective number of subscribers on YouTube alone totaling over twenty million. Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi are both young women living and producing their content in the rural countryside of China, with Dianxi Xiaoge located in the Yunnan province and Li Ziqi in the Sichuan province. Dianxi Xiaoge's content is primarily based in her small farming village and around her family's home, where she prepares traditional local recipes (from foraging to cooking) for her family. Li Ziqi's content—while also featuring her extensive cooking abilities—includes a limitless range of activities, from traditional arts and crafts to brewing alcohol. Although their videos make for a wonderfully informative and relaxing viewing experience, they also echo many of those Confucian values that have, over time, come to idealize women's role in

12. Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle*, 73-74.

the family and reinforce a gender stereotype for women in Chinese society. As Dianxi Xiaoge explains in an interview, she was raised in a traditional manner by her parents, as "[t]hey believe women should learn how to do everything in the house, so in the future they can diligently start a family."[13] Before starting to make videos, she had worked as a policewoman in Sichuan, but chose to move back home to help her sick father and assist her family.[14] Li Ziqi had also worked in the city (beginning at the young age of fourteen) before later returning to the countryside in order to take care of her grandmother.[15]

Both influencer's life stories hark back to the stereotypical role of women in continuing the family line and in caring for the other members of the family. This representation of women as family-oriented beings is also placed within the setting of a pastoral lifestyle, further emphasizing the idyllic nature of this stereotype in a society traditionally patriarchal and as long-established as that of China. Because of the nature of Chinese society in which they spread their content, Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi are effectively operating within a pre-established conservative narrative and are doing so without any resistance or differentiation. Their content consistently adheres to the formula in which they have worked before, which results in their continued perpetuation of family-oriented values surrounding activities like cooking family meals or arts and crafts. Never in their work do we watch them perform any action not conventionally ascribed to women, and, instead, we find countless videos of them reproducing

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13. Goldthread, *Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview, China's Viral Cooking Sensation (At Home with DXXG - E1)*, 2020, 2:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A__LOp_znuo&list=PL92YWp8gq03H8eI9tQK7Ot0z7IYfT31tC&index=4&ab_channel=Goldthread.

14. Goldthread, *Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview, China's Viral Cooking Sensation (At Home with DXXG - E1)*, 1:25.

15. Goldthread, *Exclusive Interview With Li Ziqi, China's Most Mysterious Internet Celebrity*, 2019, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9CfVcXoYh4&ab_channel=Goldthread.

the conventional conservative stereotype. The traditionalism the influencers reproduce and reinforce is done so from the position of young female villagers in rural China, not by wealthier city dwellers, men, or anyone connected to the government. Their place in society plays a significant role in bolstering the authenticity of their content and the lifestyles witnessed within, which only makes their content more appealing and communicable to a wider audience.

When analyzing Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi, the role of social media more specifically becomes vital to how their videos work in maintaining gender roles and stereotypes. Because of how commonplace social media usage is throughout the world in the twenty-first century, both influencers are now able to reach an ever-expanding audience, one that includes viewers that previously may not have been accessible. While it is observable on their respective social media profiles that they can effectively communicate gendered Confucian ideals more extensively now, the overwhelmingly positive responses to their content reveals that social media is not operating in a manner that instigates a reassessment of the values they portray, but is instead reinforcing them. This reinforcement occurs as more views accumulate and more positive responses are left, which leads to an even greater spread of their videos. Although Dianxi Xiaoge's and Li Ziqi's content is able to reach a wider audience now, I find it important that we consider the remaining barriers of access to the internet and social media, as well as these barriers' implications within this context. A quick scroll through either influencer's videos' comment sections will immediately reveal traces of the remaining barrier of access' consequences. The majority of both creator's audiences are located within urban settings, not among other residents of the Chinese countryside. I contend that this trend implies the existence of a kind of nostalgia for gendered Confucian pasts like those seen in the two influencer's content, a nostalgia that exists because of recent memories or a connection to memories of actual lived experiences that have confronted

gendered Confucian values. I find it problematic that, while women are entering new spaces conventionally dominated by men such as the academic and professional spheres, the conversation online is focused on the idealistic nature of Dianxi Xiaoge's and Li Ziqi's activities. This tendency of glorification requires a more thorough investigation into why the gendered Confucian values remain idealized, how these memories and this particular nostalgia continue to exist, and why there is no conversation surrounding the lack of discussion of more women's move to new spaces. I will now conclude with my argument using evidence from my analysis of Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi.

I would like to posit that the manner in which traditional gender roles and stereotypes have been reproduced and maintained in Dianxi Xiaoge's and Li Ziqi's videos, as well as within the institution of the family and in China's major cities shows how Confucianism has adapted to the modern Chinese state. This modern adaptation of Confucianism conceives of women as family-oriented entities unequal to men within the professional and academic spheres, and is buttressed by popular social media influencers like Dianxi Xiaoge's and Li Ziqi's continued creation of content within a restrictive and antiquated conservative narrative. Operating in tandem to this conservative narrative, the extremely positive receptions they receive from an audience located primarily in urban settings indicates how great the presence of gendered Confucian pasts and memories are—as well as the nostalgia for them—which insinuates the high degree of pervasiveness of these memories and the consequential gender inequalities stemming from them. These gender inequalities greatly privilege men over women, particularly in contexts where men continue to dominate and take their relative higher position for granted. This male privilege will remain as such until more women find representation in the workplace and in academia so that men are unable to continue taking their privilege for granted and are forced to discard their

traditional notions of women in the domestic sphere as docile agents of the family. While the greater representation of women in the workplace and in academia might help debase the gender inequalities resulting from Confucianism's legacy to a degree, how might we target the family as an institution more specifically, and the conceptions and stereotypes of women it produces and preserves so that women are not forced to escape to cities like Shenzhen and take the risks inherent to that venture? When confronting this question, I find it important that we do not lose ourselves in Western notions of femininity and gender roles/stereotypes, and stay mindful of the differences between Western conceptions as opposed to those that have developed separately over many millennia in China and the surrounding nations of East Asia. We must remain alert to this potential default to Western conceptions so that we can effectively look for change in the context of Chinese society, not thinking of change that would be effective in the West. I would like to conclude by acknowledging this paper's absence of research into how Confucianism's legacy constructs gender roles and stereotypes in China's rural countryside (not as portrayed by social media influencers), and will suggest that we ponder how we might confront problematic legacies like that of Confucianism in the contemporary Chinese state.

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