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Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China, by Lisa Raphals (Book Review)

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Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China. By LISA RAPHALS. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1998. Pp. 348 + illus., tables. \$21.95 (paper).

Lisa Raphals' *Sharing the Light* is a useful collection of the latest available information regarding the role of women in early Chinese history. In contrast to conventional interpretations, Raphals aims to demonstrate that in early China women were not as socially constrained as later periods portrayed them. The focus and the main virtue of her work lies in collating and interpreting a significant amount of information on this topic.

The book consists of two parts—one dedicated to Chinese stories in which women act as moral and intellectual agents, and the other focused on the evolution of Chinese concepts of the distinction between men and women. A series of detailed appendices helps corroborate Raphals' conclusions.

In part 1 (chapters 1–5), Raphals cites and describes multiple variants of early Chinese tales in which women play both positive and negative moral and intellectual roles. While sometimes tedious in their detail, these retellings, based mostly on the *Lienü zhuan* in comparison with other texts, serve several functions. Raphals uses them to highlight slight changes in nuance in representations of gender in the sources. These changes support her position that in traditional China women were not universally oppressed. She concludes from these stories that early Chinese representations of women's moral skills and sage-likeness differed little from those of men. Raphals also intends the stories to “provide a counterpoint to the representations of Western feminism” (p. 7), although she only elaborates briefly on this theme in the conclusion.

Also in part 1, Raphals comments on the significance of the history of the *Lienü zhuan*. She determines that many of the *Lienü zhuan* stories correspond to Warring States depictions of women as political, ethical, and intellectual agents. Hence, she argues that the text may be accurately ascribed to Liu Xiang (c. 79–8 B.C.E.) and that it can be taken to represent how pre-Han

sources portray women. Finally, in the last chapter of part 1, Raphals shows how Ming editions “contributed to the demise of the intellectual virtue narratives” (p. 9) by changing the organization and content of the *Lienü zhuan*. That is, she maintains that by altering the organizing themes of the tales, the Ming editions effectively erase the earlier texts’ emphasis on women’s intellectual and moral virtue.

Raphals’ reconstruction in part 2 (chapters 6–10) of historical changes in Chinese views of gender roles is particularly interesting. She makes her case here by tracing alterations in the use of certain polarities. She shows that initially, in Warring States texts and earlier, the *yin-yang* polarity is not necessarily connected to gender, and is structured as a complementarity rather than hierarchically. Raphals extends her investigation of gender to medical texts, noting that early texts do not unduly differentiate between treatment of males and females. Moreover, she argues, while these texts consider the influence of *yin* to be negative, they do not correlate *yin* with the female sex. Thus, Raphals argues that the *yin-yang* polarity only functions to assert female inferiority when it later achieves centrality in Han correlative cosmology.

Likewise, Raphals shows a similar development in *nei-wai*—the other Chinese polarity commonly used to justify the subjugation of women. Raphals argues that in early texts the association of women with the “inner” does not connote strict physical separation of males and females. Rather, it refers to different modes of activity that make male and female distinct—a distinction necessary for differentiating humans from animals. Thus, Raphals interprets what later texts take to be the *separation* of males and females (*nan-nü zhi bie*) to be a more harmless *distinction* between males and females in pre-Han texts. She contends that later commentaries superimpose subordinate norms for women in their reading of earlier texts that are not prescriptive about *nei-wai* polarities.

It is unfortunate that the introductory and concluding chapters only begin to point to some of the implications of Raphals’ argument that women in traditional China had some amount of technical expertise and social mobility. Raphals denies the obvious reading that she is positing a “Golden Age” for women in early China. Instead, she chooses to frame her discussion in terms of two related contemporary questions—whether women think differently than men, and if so, whether Confucian studies has anything to gain from recognizing this difference. Raphals notes that certain contemporary feminists argue that women reason differently, or have a “female ethic.” She suggests that if such a “female ethic” exists, then the early Chinese representation of gender that she describes might constitute a manifestation of it. This possibility should be of interest for contemporary scholarship. As Raphals points out, some China scholars are eager to claim that Confucian representations of gender resonate better with a “female ethic” than their Western counterparts do. She notes that her work now provides a chance for these schol-

ars to elaborate on a vision of Confucian sageliness that is grounded in a female body, rather than a male body. But Raphals does not sound particularly sanguine about the possible success of such an appropriation of her conclusions. She delineates two options:

On one reading, Confucian gender metaphysics may be ultimately more benign than its Western counterparts, even if it reserves androgynous sagehood for men. In the other, successive waves of Confucian ideologies—Han Confucian and Song and Ming-Qing neo-Confucian—overwhelmed an earlier, admittedly also (but less) male-dominated tradition in which wisdom and the capacity for moral judgment were relatively ungendered and in which women functioned as fully realized persons and were recognized as such. (p. 262)

Thus, either Confucian gender metaphysics is only slightly better than its Western counterparts, or Confucian gender metaphysics did not yet exist in the earlier traditions. In fact, much of Raphals’ book suggests that what we term gender difference itself was not very evident in traditional China. Hence this book does not provide us with a Chinese Golden Age for purposes of gender comparison, not only because males were dominant in the time period presented here, but also because the people of that time seem to have been less interested in the concept of gender. As a result, Raphals’ work may present more of a challenge to than an opportunity for a feminist interpretation of Confucianism.

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