

Yin-Yang Theory's Influence on Women's Inferior and Subordinate Status in Ancient China

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Abstract: *This paper aims to probe into the process of how the yin-yang theory, an ancient Chinese philosophical category impacted the ups and downs of Chinese women status at different stages throughout the ancient Chinese history. In terms of research methods, this paper adopts historical document research method as well as comparative approach. After the research, the paper came to a conclusion that over the long period, the relationship between Chinese men and women transformed from the original complementarity and harmony to the later superior and inferior hierarchy. During this process, Dong Zhongshu's falsification of the yin-yang theory attributed mainly to Chinese women's inferior and subordinate status, yet together with some other minor factors.*

Keywords: Yin-yang theory, influence, women's inferior and subordinate status, ancient China

1. Introduction

In ancient China, women's status was generally low, especially after entering the patrilineal society, as men dominated the productive activities, women's status gradually declined. They were often confined to the family, with domestic, child-bearing and child-rearing responsibilities (Li, 2014: 1). *Yin-Yang* 陰陽 is an ancient Chinese philosophical thinking and a holistic, dynamic, and dialectical world view, methodology, and life wisdom. As Joseph Needham (1956) put it, *yin* and *yang* were “the most ultimate principles of which the ancient Chinese could conceive” (232). The *Yin-Yang* thinking has had an enormous impact on “Chinese philosophies, martial arts, medicine, science, literature, politics, daily behavior, beliefs, thinking, and other arenas for thousands of years” (Lee, 2000: 1066). Originally *yin-yang* was a cosmic idea that referred to one-to-one pairs like “sunny” and “shady”, indicating the two cyclical, complementary and harmonious but not oppositional and contradictory sides of something in the cosmos. In the very beginning, the *yin-yang* binary was not intended to indicate any human relations or political ethics. But when the *yin-yang* binary was introduced to Confucianism, out of the feudal monarch's need of autocratic rule, *yang* was consigned to male and *yin* to female, signifying hierarchal gender relations. Women were considered inferior to men in the patriarchal system. And afterwards, Chinese women fell into men's subordination and was oppressed for most of the time over thousands of years.

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2. Literature Review

As late as the 1980s, few historians concerned themselves with gender matters, relegating women to the margins of China's historical narrative. Since then, the female experience has become a major focus of historical inquiry and the resulting insights have reshaped standard representations of China's past (Hinsch, 2018: ix). In terms of combining *yin-yang* theory and women status or gender hierarchy, the overseas study was more abundant than those in China. In China, Zhu Qinghua (2018) constructed feminism by adopting one of the typical Chinese philosophy *yin-yang* theory. She thought within the Confucian tradition, the ontological principles of *Yin-Yang* theory had been abused to a certain degree, and women became the sacrifice of the interpretation with this prejudice.

Overseas, Robin R. Wang, made the most studies on *yin-yang* and gender identity. Wang (2005) reviewed how Dong Zhongshu, a philosopher and statesman of the Western Han Dynasty, transformed the doctrines of “*yin-yang*” theory into the shackle of Chinese women's oppression and totally changed the gender identity in ancient China between men and women. Later, Wang (2012) made systematic introduction of the definitions and groups of correlation of some binary terms of *yin-yang* theory and explained the rich and multilayered meaning and culturalphilosophical significance of *yin-yang* thinking panoramically. The American sinologist Lisa Raphals (1998) explored how and when the *yin-yang* metaphor correlates to gender hierarchy and whether it is employed consistently. She found that before the Han correlative cosmology and, more specifically, prior to Dong Zhongshu's *Chunqiu fanlu*, the *yin-yang* metaphor was more cyclic and complementary than hierarchical. The Canadian scholar Sung Hyun Yun (2012) illustrated how the harmonious *yin-yang* concept as well as some other Confucian tenets perpetrated gender hierarchy and oppression toward women in Asia. American scholar Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) regarded *yin-yang* as a nonoppositional, complementary binary which cannot function as an adequate theoretical justification for gender oppression in China and thought *yin-yang* binary as a complex metaphor was cross gender and beyond gender.

3. Origin and Denotation of “Yin-Yang”

The earliest Chinese characters for *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 were found in the oracle-bone inscriptions and at first the terms they represented existed separately and were not connected. The words *yin* and *yang* were first mentioned in the *Shijing* 《詩經》 (*The Book of Odes*, 11-6th Century BC): “Gently blows the east wind, with *yin* and with rain” (Legge, 1960:55) in which *yin* is used in conjunction with the word rain denoting cloudy, shady weather; and “Heavy lies the dew, nothing but the *yang* can dry it” (Legge, 1960:55) in which *yang*, on the other hand, denotes the sun.

Etymologically, *yin*, as defined in *Shuowen Jiezi* 《说文解字》 (the first Chinese dictionary compiled according to the radicals by Xu Shen (circa 58-147), a Confucian classics scholar and litterateur of the Eastern Han Dynasty), means the shady side of the mountain, and *yang* the sunny side of the mountain (Wang, 1989: 463). This semantic meaning of *yin* and *yang* is based on the observation of the regular succession of the sunlight and shade and the corresponding climatic changes of warmth and coldness according to the position of the sun.

The first written record of using these two characters together was also in the *Shijing*: “Viewing the scenery at the hill, looking for *yin-yang*.”¹ It shows a scenery when the sun shines at the hill: the sunny side of the hill is *yang*, and the shady side is *yin*. This original connection of *yin-*

yang suggests an interplay between the sun, a hill and the sunlight, reflecting two opposite features of the same hill in the context, with sunny side corresponding to *yang* and shady side to *yin*.

At any rate, the meaning of *yin-yang* in the early formal written record *Shijing* is in accordance with its etymological origin explained as the shady and the sunny side of hills for “*yin*” and “*yang*” respectively. As a metaphor for shade and light, the *yin-yang* binary is a correlative binary, not an oppositional binary in which the coldness and darkness of the *yin* is always interrelated with the warmth and brightness of the *yang*, and vice versa.

In *Huai-nan-tzu* 《淮南子》 - a book written by Liu An (179 BC - 122 BC) and his followers, *Yin* and *Yang* are the principles of cosmos in the early Chinese cosmology: “The superimposed quintessences of Heaven and Earth became the *Yang* and *Yin*, the concentrating quintessences of *Yin* and *Yang* became the Four Seasons, the scattering quintessences of the Four Seasons became the myriad creatures.” (Graham, 1986: 29, 30) As listed above, the reversed sequence for the correspondence of *yin-yang* also applies here. *Yang* corresponds to Heaven, while *yin* corresponds to Earth. Extra two groups Four Seasons are also implicitly corresponded with *yang* corresponding to Spring and Summer and *yin* to Autumn and Winter.

Another early reference of *yin* and *yang* was found in *I Ching* 《易经》 (*The Book of Change*, 11-8th Century BC): “The conjunction and alteration of *yin* and *yang* is called *Dao*” (Gao, 1998: 387). More literally, it says simply, “One *yin* and one *yang* are called *Dao*”, a phrase Zhu Xi later clarifies as “The constant interaction of *yin-yang* is the *Dao*.” (Wang, 2012: 65) The *Dao* is intangible. The original meaning of the *Dao* 道 (the Way) is “path” or “road”. The *Dao* in *the Commentary* has extended meanings essentially, such as “the *Dao* of *Qian*” (乾道), “the *Dao* of *Kun*” (坤道), “the *Dao* of day and night”ⁱⁱ, etc. (Yang, 2006: 573) According to historical literature, the founder of Daoism *Laozi* (571-471 BC) was the first philosopher in China to explain the *Dao* philosophically: “The human being follows the example of earth, Earth follows the example of heaven, Heaven follows the example of the *Dao*, and the *Dao* follows the example of nature.” (Yang, 2006: 573) To *Laozi*, heaven, earth, and human being abide by the law of *Dao* and the *Dao* coheres with the law of nature, hence, the essence of the *Dao* is nature. He takes the *Dao*, nature to be the origin of everything that exists between the earth and heaven. And thus, the extended meaning of the *Dao* is the law that all things and beings in the world must abide by. The *Commentary* (Treatise on Judgments) said, “By observing the mutual attraction and influence, change and movement of everything can be seen.” (Yang, 2006: 587) The mutual attraction and influence between *yin* and *yang* reflect change and movement of everything. In other words, the origin of everything, nature or the *Dao* is caused by the mutual attraction and influence, or the law of the change caused by the interaction between *yin* and *yang*.

The concepts of *yin* and *yang* were not really interrelated until two kinds of interpretations were put forward, namely a *qi* 氣 (vital energy) interpretation and a *xingzhi* 性质 (substance) interpretation (Zhang, 2000: 84-85).

In the *qi* interpretation, *yin* and *yang* were observed as *yin qi* 陰氣 and *yang qi* 陽氣 operating in the universe. In the *Daodejing* 《道德經》 (*Tao Te Ching*, a basic classic text of ancient Chinese philosophy about Taoism), the founder of Taoism *Laozi* 老子 (571-471 BC) said “Everything is embedded in *yin* and embraces *yang*; through *chongqi* 冲氣 (vital energy) it reaches *he* 和 (harmony).” (Robin, 2005: 211) Here *yin* and *yang* function as *qi*, and through

their interaction everything comes into being. Another representative of the Taoist school *Zhuangzi* 庄子 (369-286 BC) also articulated the “*qi* of *yin* and *yang*” (211). “When the two have successful intercourse and achieved harmony, all things will be produced.”(211) Otherwise, “When the *qi* of *yin* and *yang* are not in harmony, and cold and heat come in untimely ways, all things will be harmed.”(211) *Yin* and *yang* are natural forces that bring in life through a process and movement. The correlation between the balance of the two *qi* and bodily health is also adequately stated in the *Zuo zhuan* 《左传》 (One of the Confucian classics, interpreting the Spring and Autumn Annals from rich historical materials, finished in the middle of the 4th BC): “*Tian* 天 (heaven) has six *qi*. . . . *yin*, *yang*, wind, rain, shade, and light. They divide to make four seasons, in sequence they make five rhythms, and in excess they bring calamity.” (Rosenlee, 2006: 51) The catastrophe of its imbalance is also explained, “*yin* in excess brings cold diseases, *yang* in excess brings hot diseases; wind in excess brings terminal diseases, rain in excess brings diseases of the stomach; shade in excess brings delusions, light in excess brings diseases of the heart.” (51) In the *Mozi* (Collection of works of Mohist school in pre-Qin period, circa 468-376 BC), the *yin-yang* correlation is also linked to the alternation of the four seasons signifying the succession of warmth and cold. “This is why the heat and cold made by *tian* are in due proportion; the four seasons are in tune; *yin*, *yang*, rain, and dew are timely.”(53) Such kind of *qi* interpretation conceives *yin* and *yang* as dynamic and natural forms of flowing energy, cyclic and complementary in the original strength of the universe.

In the second interpretation, *yin* and *yang* were perceived as *xingzhi* 性质 (substance), in which everything in the universe was sorted out either as *yin xing* 陰性 or *yang xing* 陽性. In the *I Ching* 《易經》 (*The Book of Changes*), *yin* and *yang* were portrayed as specific *xingzhi*. *Yang* was connected with the sun and *yin* with the moon. The *Xici* 系辭 (*Great Appendix*) said: “Heaven and earth correlate with vast and profound; the four seasons correlate with change and continuity; the significance of *yin* and *yang* correlate with the sun and the moon; the highest excellence correlates the goodness of easy and simple.” (Robin, 2005: 212) According to the statement, the highest excellence or virtue is the easy and simple goodness. And after that, the discussion on the relationship between *de* 德 (virtue) and *xing* 刑 (punishment) became the debate focus of earlier thinkers. The most famous debate concerning the good and bad aspects of *xing* (善惡之爭) is accorded with the division of *xing* 性 (nature)/*yang* and *qing* 情 (emotion)/*yin* between Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius thought “The nature of man is originally good” (Fung, 1948: 68)² while for Xunzi “*Xing* is bad (*e* 惡); its goodness (*shan* 善) is a result of artifice (*wei* 偽).” (Xunzi 23/1; Cf. K 23.1a) He defined *xing* 性 as “That which is so from birth is called *xing*. That which is generated out of the harmony of *xing*, merges with the quintessential, is aroused and responds, is not worked at but is so is called *xing*.” (Xunzi 22/2-3; Cf. K 22.1b) The *Guanzi*ⁱⁱⁱ proposed another kind of connection between *yin* and *yang* with the *xingde* 刑德 discussion but still with a focus on harmony:

The *yin* and *yang* are the primary organizational principles of Heaven and Earth, and the four seasons are the primary patterns of *yin* and *yang*. Punishment (*xing*) and virtue (*de*) should correspond to the four seasons. The sun controls *yang* and the moon controls *yin*. The *sui* 岁 (circle) controls the harmony. *Yang* is for virtue (*de*), *yin* is for punishment (*xing*), and the harmony is for conducting matters of state. (Wang, 2005: 218)

Although there were differences between these two interpretations, both descriptions revolve around two fundamental essences, namely *bian* 变 (change) and *he* 和 (harmony). The core element *bian* emphasized that the position and function of *yin-yang* were interchangeable and not fixed. Sometimes *yang* lead; at other times or in other situations *yin* guided. Another essence *he* stressed the complementary and harmonious state of the two elements in the *yin* and *yang* interactions. Both declared that *yin* and *yang* interactions generated change and constituted the foundation of everything in the universe.

Later, *yin-yang* distinction has more wider denotation and it refers to many concepts of one-to-one pairs, such as “fire and water”, “dry and moist”, “hard and soft”, “dynamic and static”, “upper and lower”, “outer and inner” etc. with “fire”, “dry”, “hard”, “dynamic”, “upper” and “outer” corresponding to *yang* and “water”, “moist”, “soft”, “static”, “lower” and “inner” corresponding to *yin* (Ritsema & Sabbadini, 2005: 46). This distinction emphasizes that the two elements in each group are correlative but not oppositional binary.

4. Finding: “Yin-Yang” Theory Evolved from Complementarity and Harmony to Gender Hierarchy

Originally, the *yin-yang* theory 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). In the *Daodejing*, the complementarity of the *yin* and the *yang* and the male and the female mode of being were obvious:

Way-making (*Dao*) gives rise to continuity, continuity gives rise to difference, difference gives rise to plurality, and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (*wanwu* 万物). Everything carries *yin* on its shoulders and *yang* in its arms, and blends these vital energies (*qi*) together to make them harmonious (*he*). (Rosenlee, 2006: 54)

Also from “Know the male (*xiong* 雄), yet safeguard the female (*ci* 雌), and be a river gorge to the empire. As a river gorge to the world, you will not lose your real potency (*neng* 能)” (54), the blending of both the *yin* and the *yang* as well as the mode of the male and the female is the key to the knowing of the grand *dao*, although they each have their distinctive qualities. Just as the unceasing generative power derivated from the blending of the *yin* and the *yang* is similar to the union of the male and the female, the male-female binary in Daoist texts is also a nonoppositional binary; in other words, they complete rather than contradict each other. The dynamic interaction of *yin-yang* is not only present in Daoist texts but also in Confucian texts as well. For instance, in the *Xunzi*:

Therefore it is said: when heaven and earth come together, then the ten thousand existants are born; when the *yin* and the *yang* act upon one another, then all changes and transformations are arisen; and when natural propensity and conscious effort join together, then the world at large is well ordered. (Rosenlee, 2006: 55)

These three binaries “heaven (*tian*)-earth (*di* 地)”, “*yin-yang*”, and “natural propensity (*xing*)-conscious effort (*wei*)” are complementary instead of contradictory. This is the case because the totality of the complementary *tian-di* binary and its effect, the ten thousand existants, is analogous with the totality of the *yin-yang* interaction and its result, dynamic transformations;

it is also analogous with the totality of the natural-the conscious and its result, harmony in the world.

However, it's more ambiguous for the tendency of *qian-kun* (乾坤) *nannu* (男女 male-female) hierarchy by Confucius:

Tian (heaven) is venerable, *di* (earth) is base, *Qian* and *kun* take their position. Humble and high are thereby set out, Venerable and base are established . . . The way of *qian* completes man (*nan*), The way of *kun* completes woman (*nu*). *Qian* knows the great beginning, *Kun* performs the completion of things. *Qian* knows with ease, *Kun* performs with simplicity. What is easy is easy to know, What is simple is easy to follow. Ease of knowing leads to closeness, Ease of following leads to accomplishment. Closeness enables duration, Accomplishment enables greatness. Duration is the worthy person's virtue, Greatness is the worthy person's field of action. By means of the easy and the simple, One grasps the ways of the whole world. When the ways of the whole world are grasped, Therein lies perfection.^{iv}

In the first three binary correlations of *tian-di*, *qian-kun*, and *nan-nu*, there is clear hierarchy since the *tian/qian/nan* is privileged over the *di/kun/nu*. According to the dualistic paradigm of the West, it would seem that the former of the correlation functions as the ideal while the latter is the dependent, derivative one. From "Qian knows the great beginning, Kun performs the completion of things", the obvious hierarchical scheme begins to slip away, instead, they presents a list of complementary relation either between the knowledge of the great beginning and the ability to bring things to completion, or between duration and greatness, or between virtue and action without gender-based.

If there's ambiguous dispute on the gender-based hierarchy in the commentaries and the appendices of *Yijing*, later, such kind of correlation of positioning with male and female was endorsed by Dong Zhongshu, a philosopher and statesman of the Western Han Dynasty (195-105 BC), "the *yin-yang* of heaven and earth should be man and woman; man and woman should be *yin-yang*" (Robin, 2012: 100), which was also echoed by Robin Wang, "although both heaven and earth are necessary and inseparable, heaven is elevated. This view puts male and female on a different scale; male is higher and weightier than female" (106). By this, he meant that humans possess some of the energy of *yin-yang*, more specifically that women possessed *yin* energy, and men possessed *yang* energy. This gendering of *yin-yang* energy may have been the result of noticing that the differences ascribed to these energies is similar to the existing and supposedly natural differences between males and females. Besides, it was Dong that completely distorted the application of *yin-yang* construct to gender hierarchy.

The first transformation that Dong made was his development from the natural *he* 和 (harmony) of *yin* and *yang* to his imposed *he* 合 (unity) of *yin* and *yang* and his construction of "Three Bonds" (*sangang* 三綱) stemmed from Confucianist and Legalist doctrines. Based on his *tianren ganying* theory, Dong asserted that all natural and human events must be correlated due to *yin-yang* interactions and there was a tension involved in each complementarity in which one would hold back the other (*xiangke* 相克), the suitable settlement being "Keeping the position of heaven and earth, rectifying the order (*xu* 序) of *yin* and *yang*, following the Way correctly and knowing its difficulties, all of these are the highest righteousness." (Robin, 2005: 214) To him, the highest righteousness was to keep a proper order of *yin* and *yang*. In *the*

Analects of Confucius, when Duke Jing of *Qi* asked Confucius about how to govern states effectively, he replied, “the ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son”(Wang, 2005: 217). Among these relationships, there is a moral code that honors mutuality in each group, between ruler and minister, father and son. In other words, the ruler (君), minister (臣), father (父) and son (子) each ought to undertake their due responsibilities and play their corresponding social roles according to their respective identities, like what Confucius himself explained, “rulers should employ their ministers by observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and ministers should serve their lord by doing their utmost loyalty (*zhong* 忠)” (Wang, 2005: 217). Based on Han’s Legalist doctrine of loyalty and filial piety, Dong inserted another relationship “husband and wife” into his formula and emphasized its correlation with “order”: “The minister serves the ruler, the son serves the father, and the wife serves the husband. If these three are followed, the world will be in order (*zhi* 治); if these three are disobeyed, the world will be in chaos. This is the constant *dao* 道 of governing the world.” (Wang, 2005: 217) Later Dong rectified the three relationships as Three Bonds,

Ruler and Minister, father and son, husband and wife are six people. Why call these six people the three bonds? One *yin* and one *yang* is the Way, *yin* brings completion to *yang*, *yang* gives *yin* an order in which hard and soft are joined. That is why these six people are called three bonds. (Wang, 2005: 217)

What’s more, Dong was not merely confined to the correlation of “three bonds” with the “order”, but extending the “order” to everything:

Everything must have *he* 合(unity). Just as *yin* is the *he* of *yang*, wife is the *he* of husband, son is the *he* of father, minister is the *he* of ruler. There is nothing without *he*, yet wherever there is *he* there is *yin* and *yang*....The righteousness of ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife all come from the way of *yin* and *yang*. (Robin, 2005: 217)

By replacing the “harmony” (*he* 和) of *yin* and *yang* with his imposed “unity” (*he* 合) of *yin* and *yang*, Dong reestablished the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. The “harmony” (*he* 和) of *yin* and *yang* is totally different from his imposed “unity” (*he* 合). As Confucius claimed, “Exemplary persons seek *he* (harmony) not sameness; petty persons, then, are the opposite.” (Robin, 2005: 216) The “harmony” (*he* 和) of *yin* and *yang* is a mixture of two or more elements into a harmonious completeness without losing their distinctive identities. But the imposed “unity” (*he* 合) is the converging of two elements in conformity to a hierarchal order. This *he* results in a sameness that tends to uniformity rather than harmony. It obliges the submission of the inferior individual to his or her superior. Wife submits to husband. Son submits to father. Minister submits to ruler. All the things embodied by *yin* submit to those by *yang*.

Another transformation that Dong made was about the human being’s nature. For Dong Zhongshu, human nature (*xing*), had two basic elements or manifestations, *yin* and *yang*. Dong went further to identify *yin* with feelings or emotions (*qing*) and *yang* with nature (*xing*). Human nature as a composite of *yin* and *yang* is capable of two outward expressions. *Yang*, being the beneficent force of *tian*, exhibits itself as benevolence (*ren* 仁), while *yin*, the chastising force of the universe, expresses itself as covetous desire or greed (*tan* 貪). Dong resolved the Classical dispute between Mencius’ goodness of human nature and Xunzi’s badness of human nature by concluding that human nature contains “rudimentary goodness”

(善端) because it has *yang* but also contains the seed of badness because it has *yin*: “The human body has *xing* and *qing* just as heaven has *yang* and *yin*. One can’t confer the basic stuff (*zhi*) without bearing in mind the *qing*; this will be like talking about *yang* in heaven without considering *yin*.” (Robin, 2005: 222)

Due to Dong Zhongshu’s pioneering elaboration of the relationship of *yin* and *yang* with emotion (*qing*) and human nature (*xing*), the ontological connotation of *yin* and *yang* in the Classical texts is endowed with an ethical assessment of greed and benevolence. The relationship of *yin* and *yang* devolves into an ethical debate between good and bad, right and wrong. There’s a special section on *xing* and *qing* in the *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall*:

What are *xing* 性 and *qing* 情? *Yang* makes what is *xing*, *yin* brings what is *qing*. Human life is endowed with *yin* and *yang qi*, therefore it contains within five *xing* and six *qing* (*wuxing liuqing* 五性六情)^v. *Qing* is the product of *yin*; thus, there are the varying desires. *Xing* is the effect of *yang*; thus, there are the forming principles. *Yang qi* is benevolence (*ren*); *yinqi* is greed (*tan*); therefore, *qing* has desires and *xing* has benevolence (*ren*). (Robin, 2005:222)

As mentioned before, earlier thinkers had debate on human being’s nature either between *xing* (punishment) and *de* (virtue) or between good and bad. In terms of the basis on the *yin xing* or *yang xing*, they were harmonious. There’s no absolute *xing* or *de*, good or bad, and the two aspects could change after the acquired efforts. Dong adopted the first part of the *Guanzi*’s idea but omitted the focus on harmony. He gave a straightforward definition of *yin* and *yang* in terms of *xing* (punishment) and *de* (virtue). “Heaven and earth are constant and there is one *yin* and one *yang*. *Yang* is *tian* (heaven)’s virtue (天德) and *yin* is *tian* (heaven)’s punishment (天刑).” (Robin, 2005: 218) What he meant by this definition was echoed in his other formulation of *yin* and *yang*:

Yang qi is warm and *yin qi* is cold; *yang qi* is to give, *yin qi* is to take; *yang qi* is benevolent, *yin qi* is perverse; *yang qi* is deliberate, *yin qi* is hurried; *yang qi* is love, *yin qi* is hate; *yang qi* is to give life, *yin qi* is to give death... Therefore, *tian* values *yang* (貴德) and disvalues *yin* (賤陰). (Robin, 2005: 218)

Here Dong incorporated the *qi* interpretation and *xingzhi* interpretation to the standards of social and personal conduct that correspond to the ethical dimensions of *yin* and *yang*. And consequently, this lead to negative and positive values between a series of dualistic opposition of *yin* and *yang*. Anything that is identified with *yin* is bad and negative and those with *yang* is good and positive. This set a rationalized basis for a new kind of political authority, the one that no longer based on good moral virtues but on the power to enforce through rewards and punishments the supposedly proper ordering of social relationships. This new kind of political authority paved the way for the preconceived stereotypes of anything or anyone correlated with the *yin-yang* reference in the subsequent Confucian states.

By transforming women’s status from the original “complementarity” and “harmony” to the later “conformity” and “submission” under his interpretation of *yin-yang* theory correlated with “heaven” and “earth”, “*qian*” and “*kun*”, “male” and “female”, Dong justified Chinese women’s subordination and inferiority to men through the *yin-yang* theory.

The rise of the Neo-Confucianism^{vi} of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) marks an important transition in the history of Chinese women by reinterpreting the Confucian classics based on the division of the universe into *yin* and *yang* and further restraining women both theoretically and practically.

In theory, Neo-Confucian thinkers often made the statements about *yin* and *yang* from their practical experiences with gender stereotypes. “As *yin* and *yang* are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of *yang* is rigidity; the function of *yin* is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.” (Hinsch, 1995: 24) *Yang*/Man has the stereotype of rigidity and strength while *yin*/woman has that of yielding and gentleness. In turn, these generalizations were applied back to gender relations as a philosophic justification for adherence to stereotypical sexual roles, which was echoed in the writings of Zhang Zai (1020-1077, one of the supreme leaders of the Neo-Confucian resurgence): “When the *yang* brightness is supreme, the virtuous nature operates; when the *yin* turbidity is supreme, material desires occur... the nature of *yin* is always to follow.” (24) He saw *yang* as the active force responsible for the expanding qualities of the physical world, whereas *yin* passivity resulted in the contraction of matter. Another representative figure of Neo-Confucianism from the Southern Song Dynasty Zhu Xi (1130-1200) explicitly related superiority and lead(ing) to the status of man and husband while inferiority and follow(ing) to that of woman and wife: “Between man and woman, there is an order of superiority and inferiority, and between husband and wife, there is the principle of who leads and who follows. This is a constant principle.” (Pang-White 2013, 448). This so-called constant principle further determined women and wives’ inferiority and compliance to men and husbands afterwards.

In practice, women’s personal freedom in the Song Dynasty was further confined. The most cruel symbol of the subjugation of Chinese women was foot-binding, a brutal custom originated during the fifty years that elapsed between the Tang and Song Dynasties (907-959 A.D.), in which the four lesser toes were broken and bent under into the sole, and the sole and heel were forced as close together as possible (Greenhalgh, 1977, 7). Women suffered from severe pain of this premeditated hurt for years for a so-called respectable marriage but this inhuman physical mutilation was just to cater to their morbid aesthetic and erotism to men, who thought that the three golden lotus highlighted the weak feminine beauty. In fact, there was also men’s selfishness got in the way. Physically constrained from doing otherwise, footbound wives had to stay at home and do their domestic and reproductive tasks.

Another restriction was on women’s divorce and widow’s remarriage. Prior to the Song especially in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), women had a relatively high degree of freedom to divorce and remarry. However, their personal freedom was deprived as the revival of the Neo-Confucianism. Some Neo-Confucian thinkers beheld an uneven attitude toward marriage. On the one hand, Cheng Yi insisted that “When man and woman are joined together in wedlock, [the union] is unchangeable throughout their lives. Hence according to the principle of propriety there shall not be any remarriage” (Ts’ai 1950, 330-331). He did not extend his statement to men but only emphasized women’s chastity, like in his famous saying: “To starve to death is a very small matter. To lose one’s integrity (chastity), however, is a very serious matter” (Zhu and Lu 1967, 177). Although it was later more allegorized that male literati and officialdom should value moral integrity above life, it did refer to starved widows at first. But on the other hand to a man, “If the wife is unworthy what harm does it do to divorce her?” (Ts’ai 1950, 331-32). In his opinion, a husband could divorce his wife over a trivial matter. In marriage, men’s and women’s rights to divorce and to remarry were not even.

The Neo-Confucians highlighted the flawed nature of *yin*, the basic feminine element, enshrining this antipathy in their complex metaphysical systems. The elaborate cosmologies of mature Neo-Confucian discourse were invariably based on the dipartite division of the universe into *yin* and *yang*. This pair of abstractions was analogous to the separation of the human world according to female and male. And therefore, it can be said that the Neo-Confucianism further aggravates the oppression of Chinese women.

5. Discussion

If Dong Zhongshu is regarded as the culprit of Chinese women's oppression for thousands of years, is there any other person or factor attributing to this problem? The answer is definitely yes.

There has always been a dispute over whether Confucius was a sexist since he had some ambiguous statements. Apart from his statement of “*Tian* (heaven) is venerable, *di* (earth) is base”, he had some other suspicious occasions. The most famous one was “Of all the people in the world, women and servants are the most difficult to keep in the house.”^{vii}(Wawrytko, 2000: 174) There were many types of interpretations for the controversial word “women” which may refer to either lower-classed women, having a status like servants (Kinney 2017, 150), or concubines or instead to all women (Li 2000, 83). No matter “women” refers to which one, there is a parallel between “women” and “servants”. The servants referred to in the text are literally “small men” (*xiaoren* 小人), which varies between “inferior men” (Muller 2018) and “petty persons” (Li 2000, 83). And therefore, “women” is logically equated with “inferior women” and “petty women”. Wawrytko (2000, 174) defends that Confucius shouldn't be criticized for condemning women as a whole by this remark. In his opinion, “women” and “servants” are a certain social subset of human beings, functioning in different servile roles. As early as in the Zhou dynasty, the inner/outer gender-based division of labor between women and men had been established, that is, women's unique and socially indispensable roles as wives and mothers required them to work “within” (*nei* 内) at home, while men handled the outer (*wai* 外) or public affairs like politics and warfare.

Chinese women's confinement and distinction not only comes from their male counterparts, but also from their female siblings. In the long ancient Chinese history, there were *Four Books for Women* (*Nusishu* 女四書) written by women as the standard texts for women's education, obliging them into conducting certain social and moral norms and forming the fixed gender stereotypes of women as virtuous wives and good mothers.

The earliest instruction book *Admonitions for Women*^{viii} (*Nv Jie* 《女诫》, 110-112), was written in the Eastern Han Dynasty by a female historian, writer and politician Ban Zhao, in which she put forward the famous notion of “Three Obediences, Four Virtues” (*Sancong Side* 三从四德) to educate morally-qualified women to maintain the family as well as the social order for preserving status of the ruling class. “Three Obediences” (*Sancong* 三从) determines a woman's submission to men all her life, that is “In her youth, a maiden follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her eldest son.”^{ix}(Guo, 2010:6) “Four Virtues” (*Side* 四德) are applied to the cultivation of women's moral qualities, which include women's virtue (*fude* 婦德), women's speech (*fuyan* 婦言), women's comportment (*furong* 婦容) and women's work (*fugong* 婦功)^x(Rosenlee, 2006: 104-105), requiring married women to be self-disciplined and self-restrained, to get rid of their personal desires, to unconditionally yield, to patiently endure and to painstakingly

undertake her domestic duties, the highest standards for a woman to strive for and preserve throughout her life. This most oppressive feudal ideology and moral dogma suppressed Chinese women for thousands of years, forcing them into certain social norms and confining their freedom and vitality.

The second *Analects for Women* 《女论语》 (*Nv Lunyu*)^{xi} (791) was written by the women scholars Song Ruoxin and Song Ruozhao in the Tang Dynasty to raise specific demands for becoming dutiful wives and offer practical advice for young girls in their dealing with their future in-laws and household management. In contrast with the ambitious title, *Analects for Women* does not appeal to the canon in defining gender propriety but composed of simple verses of four characters, which might be intended to facilitate learning and reciting by semi-literate young girls.

In spite of continuing offering practical advice to women to properly perform their gender roles, unlike the previous two women's textbooks, the Ming Empress Renxiaowen's *Instruction for the Inner Quarters*^{xii} 《内训》 (*Neixun*, early fifteenth century), was specifically written for the imperial female members of the Ming court in the palace to deal with court politics and management.

Although female literacy was first explicitly advocated in *Admonitions for Women*, there has always been a debate on the compatibility between women's virtues and female literacy. The debate reached its height during the Ming-Qing dynasties and was reflected in the fourth women's textbook *Concise Selection of Model Women* 《女範捷錄》 (*Nvfan jielu*) written by the mid-Qing compiler Wang Xiang's widowed mother, Madam Liu. She refuted the popular Ming saying of "A woman without talent is virtuous" and concluded that female literacy made the observation of ritual propriety possible and further brought out female virtue. In her opinion, talent and virtue were not just compatible but rather intertwined. Although men and women are different, she refused to hold women's education to a lower standard and thought men and women were equal in some aspects like carrying out the virtue of filiality, which demonstrates a subtle change in women's own perception of themselves of becoming more self-affirmative and empowered in their historical consciousness.

6. Conclusion

American scholar Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) thought *yin-yang* theory cannot function as an adequate theoretical justification for gender oppression in China but this essay disagrees with her. Originally, *yin-yang* was a cosmic concept that is cyclic, complementary, and correlative, but not oppositional and contradictory and the *yin-yang* binary was not intended to signify any human relations or political ethics but the harmony of human nature. But when it was introduced to Confucian society, *yin-yang* was gradually connected with gender hierarchy especially after Dong Zhongshu's two transformation. Dong's work offers a new perspective on *yin* and *yang*, that is, to make the social subordination of *yin* to *yang* natural and justifiable. Ascribing ethical connotations to the notions of *yin* and *yang* easily leads to a rationalization of the social inferiority of women (*yin*) to men (*yang*). Although the later Neo-Confucianism, women's textbooks *Four Books for Women* written by women further imprisoned women's thought and freedom, Dong Zhongshu's falsification of the *yin-yang* theory played a pivotal role in determining Chinese women's inferior and subordinate status and justified the social oppression of Chinese women for thousands of years.

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Notes:

ⁱ *The Book of Odes*, “Daya” 大雅. James Legge translated the word *yin-yang* as “the light and the shade”; see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 4 (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994), p. 488. Quoted from Wang, Robin R. 2005. “Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of Yin-Yang Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity” in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Apr., 2005), p. 211. Note: For the same sentence “Viewing the scenery at the hill, looking for *yin-yang*”, Robin Wang translated it as “Viewing the scenery at the hill, looking for *yinyang*” in her book *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (2012), without hyphen in “*yinyang*” but referring to the same philosophical concept “陰陽”. Considering the inner close relation between “*yin*” and “*yang*”, this article uses a hyphen in the middle.

ⁱⁱ Originally in the *Zhouyi*, the *qian* and the *kun*, symbolized by unbroken and broken lines, are the primary makeup of each hexagram, a simplified method for divination, replacing the early turtle-shell divination method in the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1045 BCE).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Guanzi* is a compilation of statements of various schools of thought in the pre-Qin period. It was written about the Warring States period (475 ~ 221 BC) to the Qin and Han Dynasties. The contents are very varied, including legalists, Confucianists, Daoists, Yin-yang school, and etc. The thoughts involved in the book are the great *Sutra* and *Dharma* used by Chinese politicians in the pre-Qin period to govern the country and stabilize the world.

^{iv} *Yijing*, “*Dazhuan*” *Commentary IA*, 1.1, 4-7; cf. Wilhelm/Baynes (1961), 301-308. Quoted *ibid.*, p.63. The *Zhouyi* 《周易》 (the *Book of Change*) is made of two parts: the *Yijing* 《易经》 (the main Text), which is considered to have been written approximately before 1150 BC by Ji Chang, King Wen of Zhou, and the *Yizhuan* 《易传》 (the *Commentary*), which was finished around 400 BC. The *Commentary* has 10 parts including *Tuan Zhuan* 《彖传》 (*Treatise on Judgments 1 and 2 volumes*), *Xiang Zhuan* 《象传》 (*Treatise on Symbolisms 1 and 2 volumes*), *Wen Yan Zhuan* 《文言传》 (*Treatise on Remarks about Qian and Kun*), *Xici Shangxia Zhuan* 《系辞上、下传》 (*Appended Statements 1 and 2 volumes*), *Shuo Gua Zhuan* 《说卦传》 (*Treatise on Remarks about*

Hexagrams), *Xu Gua Zhuan* 《序卦传》 (*Treatise on the Sequence of Hexagrams*) and *Za Gua Zhuan* 《杂卦传》 (*Treatise on the Names of Hexagrams*). Therefore, the *Commentary* is also named as *Shi Yi* 《十翼》 (*Ten Wings*), which is traditionally attributed to Confucius. 天尊地卑，乾坤定矣。卑高以陈，贵贱位矣...乾道成男，坤道成女，乾知大始，坤作成物。乾以易知，坤以简能；易则易知，简则易从；易知则有亲，易从则有功；有亲则可久，有功则可大；可久则贤人之德，可大则贤人之业。易简，而天下之理得矣；天下之理得，而成位乎其中矣。

^v The five xing are benevolence (*ren*仁), righteousness (*yi*義), ritual (*li*禮), wisdom (*zhi*智), and trust (*xin*信). The six qing are pleasure (*xi*喜), anger (*nu*怒), sadness (*ai*哀), joy (*le*樂), love (*ai*愛) and greed (*tan*貪).

^{vi} Neo-Confucianism, beginning in the eleventh century, was a revival of classical Confucian values with new interpretations. It focused on self-cultivation, emphasizing development of rational, moral, and affective natures so that the heart and mind entered into “one body” with Heaven and Earth and all creation. Quoted from Needham, Joseph. Neo-Confucianism. *Comprehensive index starts* in volume 5, p.1576.

^{vii} The complete sentence was “Of all the people in the world, women and servants are the most difficult to keep in the house. If you are familiar with them, they forget their positions. But if you keep them at a distance, they are discontented.” 唯女子與小人，為難養也。近之則不孫，遠之則怨。 Revised edition of translation by Ku Hung-ming in *English Translation of the Four Books* (Taipei: The Council of Chinese Cultural Renaissance, 1980), p. 155. Quoted from Wawrytko, Sandra A. Kongzi as Feminist: Confucian Self-cultivation in A Contemporary Context. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 27(2): (June 2000) 171–186. P. 174.

^{viii} It is composed of seven chapters entitled “Base and Weakling” (*beiruo* 卑弱), “Husband and Wife” (*fufu* 夫婦), “Respect and Tolerance” (*jingshun* 敬順), “Women’s Conduct” (*fixing* 婦行), “Undivided Attention” (*zhuanxin* 專心), “Bending and Following” (*qucong* 曲從), and “Harmony with Junior Brothers- and Sisters-in-Law” (*heshumei* 和叔妹). Quoted from Rosenlee, Li-hsiang Lisa. *Confucianism And Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*. 2006. P. 104.

^{ix} See *Book of Rites*, op. cit., note 5, chs 4 and 6. 未嫁从父，既嫁从夫，夫死从子。 Quoted from Guo, Li. (2010). *Tales of Self Empowerment: Reconnoitering Women’s Tanci in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-century China*. University of Iowa. P. 6.

^x Women’s virtue (*fude*) signifies one’s adherence to ritual propriety expressed in a manner of tranquility rather than a colorful display of one’s talent and brilliance. In the same humble manner, women’s speech (*fuyan*) signifies not one’s persuasive skills or eloquence but one’s ability to be circumspect. Women’s comportment (*furong*) focuses on the clean and proper presentation of oneself instead of the attractiveness of one’s appearance. Women’s work (*fugong*) consists in the practical skills of weaving and spinning for textile production and the domestic skill of food preparation for feasts or ancestral sacrifice. Quoted from Rosenlee, Li-hsiang Lisa. *Confucianism And Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*. 2006. P. 104-105.

^{xi} These descriptions of women’s domestic duties include: *li shen* 立身 (Establishing One’s Person), *xue zuo* 学作 (Learning the Work), *xue li* 学禮 (Learning the Rituals), *zao qi* 早起 (Rising Early), *shi fu mu* 事父母 (Serving One’s Parents), *shi jiu gu* 事舅姑 (Serving Parents-in-Law), *shi fu* 事夫 (Serving One’s Husband), *xun nan nv* 训男女 (Instructing Boys and Girls), *guan jia* 管家 (Managing the Household), *dai ke* 待客 (Hosting Guests), *he rou* 和柔 (Harmony and Gentleness) and *shou jie* 守节 (Guarding One’s Integrity). Quoted from White, Ann Pang. *The Confucian Four Books for Women*. Oxford University Press, 2018. P., vi.

^{xii} Empress Renxiaowen’s instructions include: *de xing* 德性 (Virtuous Nature), *xiu shen* 修身 (Self-Cultivation), *shen yan* 慎言 (Prudent Speech), *jin xing* 谨行 (Careful Conduct), *qin li* 勤励 (Diligence), *jie jian* 节俭 (Frugality), *jing jie* 警戒 (Watchfulness), *ji shan* 积善 (Accumulating Good Deeds), *qian shan* 迁善 (Becoming Good), *chong sheng* 崇圣 (Revering Sagely Teachings), *jing xian fan* 景贤范 (Admiring Wise Role Models), *shi fu mu* 事父母 (Serving One’s Parents), *shi jun* 事君 (Serving One’s Ruler), *shi jiu gu* 事舅姑 (On Serving Parents-in-Law), *feng ji si* 奉祭祀 (Performing Religious Rites), *mu yi* 母仪 (Model Motherhood), *mu qin* 睦亲 (Friendly Relationship with Family Clans), *ci you* 慈幼 (Benevolent Love for the Young), *dai xia* 逮下 (Treating Imperial Concubines), *dai wai qi* 待外戚 (Treating Imperial Consorts’ Maternal Relatives). Quoted from *ibid.*, p. vii.