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The case of a crafting care workshop in Shenzhen: Considering the experiences of middle-aged women and social order from the perspective of Confucian Feminism

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Abstract

Gender equality is often evaluated through the liberal constructs of individual autonomy and labour participation. In contemporary China, many women's wellbeing and agency are also shaped through everyday negotiations of relational obligations within families, communities, and state-regulated public life. This thesis explores the lived experiences of a group of middle-aged Chinese women participating in a community handcrafting workshop located within a Party Masses Service Centre in Shenzhen. I examine how participants navigate formal (state-affiliated) and informal (peer-formed) infrastructures of support to secure safety, belonging, and practical resources in this space and beyond. I am particularly interested in how these arrangements enable participants to engage in and reflect on culturally resonant forms of gendered agency.

Theoretically, thesis is guided primarily by Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee's reconstructive Confucian feminism, focusing on four core virtues: *Xiao* 孝 (Filial Piety); *Ren* 仁 (Humaneness/Benevolence); *Li* 礼 (Propriety/Ritual); *He* 和 (Harmony), as practical ethical tools rather than fixed patriarchal imperatives for participating women. Rosenlee's work informed both the ethical orientation of the study and my interpretation of the accounts of four workshop members.

Methodologically, I employed a qualitative case-based approach, combining sustained participant observation in the workshop (11 months) and four in-depth semi-structured interviews in Mandarin with four of the workshop members. The participants included Gang (lead instructor, retired), Hua (logistics manager, retired), Qiao (co-instructor, full-time housewife), and Wan (regular member, full-time housewife). These women represented a cross-section of the workshop's roles and domestic contexts, offering rich insights into how middle-aged Chinese women navigate gender dynamics and relational wellbeing.

Findings suggest that the workshop functions as an enclave of care that supports the wellbeing of participating women through institutional legitimacy and safety, peer-based practices of teaching and mutual support, and the re-articulation of Confucian virtues toward reciprocal responsibility and negotiated harmony. I argue that the everyday relational competencies displayed by workshop members constitute ethical expertise and a form of practical agency under the conditions of the present social order in China.

This thesis contributes to feminist and community psychologies by exploring how women's experiences and agency move them beyond a binary of oppression versus resistance. In acting with agency, participants balance the preservation of traditional relational values and responsibilities that are highly gendered, whilst seeking increased equity and agency for women. From exploring these issues and tensions with participating women, I reframe their relational labour as ethical expertise, and as a universal human competency rather than women's naturalised responsibility.

Keywords: Confucian feminism; relational wellbeing; gender inequality; relational agency; Chinese women's workshops; social order; cultural rearticulations

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Chapter 1: Context, Purpose, and Significance

Scholars have long documented how women's groups function as transformative spaces for empowerment, social cohesion, and connection (Jaiswal et al., 2024; Longman, 2018). Across developing nations, Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) programs have demonstrated statistically significant improvements in participants' psychosocial wellbeing (Stark et al., 2022). In refugee-camp settings, for example, regular WGSS sessions can reduce social isolation by providing structured opportunities for women to meet, share practical support, and build peer networks (Stark et al., 2022). These workshops serve as platforms for skill development and community building, offering marginalised groups opportunities to address systemic inequalities (Deepa & Noronha, 2024).

Globally, workshops also help women preserve cultural continuity. Research on South Sudanese women in Australia highlights how workshops enable participants to redefine cultural and artistic practices while fostering heritage preservation (Lenette et al., 2019). By creating women-only spaces, such initiatives provide environments where participants can critically discuss gender norms and foster agency (Lewis et al., 2015).

However, the design of these workshops is deeply influenced by local cultural and political environments (De Smet & Boros, 2021). While global examples highlight transformative potential, the role of such spaces in China is shaped by unique historical and political considerations. Understanding how these workshops meet China's specific needs requires a closer examination of the emergence, societal functions, and impacts of such groups, particularly for older women who bear the primary burden of the nation's shifting gendered care structures. This is the focus of the present thesis on the experiences of members of one such group in Shenzhen.

In this opening chapter, I first consider the broader international landscape of women's workshops to establish their global utility in fostering psychosocial wellbeing. I then narrow our focus to China, examining how these initiatives must adapt to distinctive local realities. Next, we consider the research justification and significance of this thesis. The chapter is completed with the research focus and outline of subsequent chapters.

1.1 Women's Workshops in China: Adapting to Cultural and Political Realities

Whilst the global significance of women's workshops is well-documented (Lenette et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2022), comparatively less attention has been paid to how these groups operate in China in participants' everyday lives. This thesis draws on international insights while examining how Confucian traditions, state oversight, and the evolving needs of women in a rapidly modernising society shape the ways such workshops are organised in China and the functions they serve for participants' everyday wellbeing (Li et al., 2021).

Historically, the design of women's workshops in China has been shaped profoundly by political structures as well as cultural heritage. Lu (2020) notes that the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) established urban neighbourhood workshops to employ women, illustrating how state policy has directly influenced these spaces. More recently, Jiang et al. (2024) examine bamboo weaving programmes in rural China, showing how workshops can support women's livelihoods while also preserving intangible cultural heritage. These examples suggest that women's workshops in China do more than build skills; they can function as culturally resonant, state-compatible spaces where empowerment and community wellbeing are interwoven.

In contrast, women's empowerment workshops in Western contexts often adopt a more explicit feminist advocacy and associated political pursuits that are somewhat more constrained in China today. For instance, Withers (2020) shows that the Women's Liberation Movement in 1970s Britain successfully established technical workshops that created autonomous women-only spaces, combining skill-building with political consciousness-raising. These initiatives enabled over 300 local advocacy groups to directly challenge patriarchal control over knowledge and resources, particularly during a critical shift from mechanical to digital technologies. Likewise, recent research within the European context highlights the potential of 'communities of practice' to address structural stigma in academia. For example, Ventura et al. (2021) examine the ACT project, which argues that standard professional evaluations often undervalue caregiving. Consequently, the authors suggest that simply treating men and women as 'equal' is insufficient. Instead, the initiative advocates for specific policy reforms to counter the constraints that inadvertently reinforce inequalities for women. One such reform involves explicitly recognising family care as a positive asset in curriculum vitae that reflects significant contributions made to society by women.

Such research underscores the necessity of addressing two dimensions often side-lined in structural reforms: gendered relational contexts and everyday embodied realities for women. In this thesis, relational contexts refer to the complex web of family commitments and interdependent connections that define a woman's daily existence. This aligns with Rosenlee's (2024) assertion that individuals are inherently relational beings rather than isolated agents. Similarly, embodied realities encompass the physical and temporal demands of caregiving and reproductive labour. As Ventura et al. (2021) note, treating men and women 'the same' obscures the actual weight of sustaining a family. By conflating equality with sameness, such approaches risk entrenching competition on unequal terms rather than fostering substantive equality. This risks leaving the root causes of inequality untouched.

Such gendered distinctions are especially crucial for the Chinese context, where the social order is built upon Confucian relational values that carry gendering assumptions. Thus, while the workshop in this study may lack overt political advocacy, they directly engage with these 'relational' and 'embodied' spheres through communal care. This offers an alternative pathway to well-being that navigates both political boundaries and cultural values.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains close oversight over such collective activities (Fu, 2017), creating constraints on how gender issues are mobilised. However, feminist ideas from outside Chinese society are not excluded but must be embedded or rearticulated within culturally resonant forms to fit our context. The Bobai workshop in rural Guangxi exemplifies this via what Benney (2012) terms a "g-localised" strategy. Here, women utilise traditional folk art to explore global feminist concepts of bodily autonomy and solidarity. By framing this sensitive advocacy as 'cultural preservation' rather than political activism, the group negotiates state boundaries whilst pursuing sustainable change in the self and domestic sphere.

The workshop in this study, held at a Party Masses Service Centre in Shenzhen, reflects this balance. While I provide a comprehensive account of the workshop in the Methodology and Analysis chapters, its location is significant here. The Centre does not explicitly present itself as a women's empowerment space, yet its programs, ranging from crafting to hairdressing, achieve such ends indirectly. Through acts of service, such as offering free haircuts to neighbours, women embody Confucian values of reciprocity and mutual care.

Crucially, the Centre's affiliation with the state offers institutional legitimacy and security. Many older adults in China face significant barriers to participation in civic life, including susceptibility to fraud and exploitation (Chen & Hartt, 2021; Xing et al., 2020). In a climate where the elderly are targeted by scams, government endorsement functions as a vital signal of safety. Consequently, this sense of security is a prerequisite for engagement, as this thesis will demonstrate. Older women must feel secure before workshops can become effective spaces for cultivating wellbeing.

Once safety is established, collaboration can flourish. Research by Liu et al. (2023) and Moosad & Vaughan (2020) confirms that culturally meaningful, trusting environments enable older women to challenge stereotypes and forge collective identities. By maintaining a culturally sensitive focus, these programs align with state priorities while fostering subtle forms of empowerment. However, we need to learn more about how these workshops operate and are experienced by participating women in the context of their everyday lives.

1.2 Crafting Workshops as a Unique Fit for Middle-aged Chinese Women in Shenzhen

Crafting workshops resonate deeply with middle-aged¹ Chinese women because they are embedded in longstanding cultural traditions. Historically, textile arts were closely tied to feminine ideals, symbolising values such as patience and moral cultivation. Gao (2010), for example, notes that Ming and Qing dynasty embroidery positioned needlework as a medium for both moral refinement and artistic expression. This cultural legacy continues to shape how many women view handcrafting: not merely as a task, but as an expression of care and cultivated femininity. By centring these activities, the workshops tap into this respected register of gendered identity.

Beyond this cultural legacy, the workshops' resonance is rooted in the transition from state socialism to a market economy initiated by Deng's 1980s reforms. As China's first Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen attracted millions of rural migrant women to its manufacturing

¹ In the Chinese context, middle aged is frequently defined as the 45 to 60 age range, particularly in demographic research focusing on the intersection of employment and familial caregiving (see National Institutes of Health, 2021). Specifying this range highlights the unique experiences of Chinese women as they navigate traditional family expectations alongside the rapid historical growth of the country through different periods.

sectors (Bach, 2010; Lee, 1998). Employers specifically targeted these women, capitalising on perceived ‘feminine’ traits to enhance productivity and simplify management (Guo & Shen, 2016; Lee, 1998). For many migrants, paid labour became a dual locus of meaning. It was intrinsically linked to family responsibility, while also offering a pathway to personal freedom and dignity that was often constrained in rural life. Migration was thus not an abstract choice but a pragmatic strategy for survival and self-definition. This era profoundly shaped how many of today’s middle-aged women understand work and agency.

Consequently, the Party Masses Service Centres function as vital sites for collective reflection. Participants largely share a common trajectory as former rural-to-urban migrants who have achieved upward mobility. Crafting within this familiar setting facilitates the articulation of shared experiences regarding migration, work adaptations, and decades of urban life. This validation process mirrors findings by Peng & Zhao (2021), who documented how cultural practices like Tai Chi, enabled Chinese older immigrants in Australia to find mutual support. By combining culturally valued skills with shared memories, the Shenzhen workshops foster bonds based on collective identity.

This peer-based connection is particularly significant given the broader socio-cultural landscape. Migration and the shift from extended to nuclear family structures have eroded traditional support systems, leaving many women vulnerable to isolation (Xie et al., 2017; Yanjin et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies confirm that this urban isolation is strongly linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes (Zhao et al., 2025). In response, workshops provide a platform for connection where women form friendships and support one another, easing loneliness and enhancing wellbeing.

Crucially, this restored sense of communal belonging serves as the foundation for a subtle form of identity work. As I will document, although these workshops do not directly challenge gender norms, they empower participants through creative agency. Research on women’s crafting in Liverpool also shows that participants assert value through artistic contributions, gently pushing back against the expectation of women as solely caregivers (Platt, 2019). I will document how this form of empowerment harmonises with Confucian principles, allowing social change to unfold in a culturally respectful way.

Thus, I approach the workshop as a transformative space wherein older women can celebrate heritage, connect with peers, and find empowerment through collaboration. By aligning with

traditional values while avoiding political sensitivity, the workshop provides a sustainable model for promoting subtle shifts in gendered dynamics. To fully appreciate the significance of such workshops, we must first examine the broader scholarly context and research gaps that this study aims to address.

1.3 Research Justification and Significance

Western feminist approaches emphasising confrontational activism often prove “less relevant” for local issues and risk “symbolic colonisation” when applied uncritically to contexts such as China (Dong, 2023; Mohanty, 1988; Rosenlee, 2024). Indeed, unadapted Anglo-American frameworks can “do more harm than good” in different societal and cultural contexts (Preitler, 2012, as cited in Cassim, 2020, p. 166). In contrast, Chinese society prioritises harmony and subtle power negotiation (Li et al., 2021). These differences suggest a gap in academic discourse, which has tended to overlook values-based, non-confrontational empowerment strategies among groups such as middle-aged Chinese women (Dong, 2023; Mohanty, 1988; Li et al., 2018). Furthermore, much existing scholarship critiques Confucianism solely as a source of patriarchal oppression, neglecting its potential as a living, adaptable resource to be renegotiated in everyday life (Rosenlee, 2024)

However, contemporary negotiations of agency are not merely responses to external pressures. They are also intertwined with a cultural consciousness in which ancient archetypes continue to shape the parameters of female agency (Dong, 2023; Hershatter, 2002; Leung, 2003). While mythological figures like Nüwa or Mazu offer historical alternatives to the restrictive *Three Obediences*², they simultaneously reinforce a natural cage of biological essentialism. By framing female power as an innate, supernatural gift rather than a model for cultivated merit, a sharp contrast to the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation, these deified archetypes can inadvertently justify exploitation (Xu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2019). Modern merit rhetoric often traps women in domestic roles under the guise of natural efficiency (Sun & Chen, 2015), while the celebration of miraculous outliers like Mazu tends to eclipse the

² The “Three Obediences” is a classical Confucian gender norm prescribing that a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son in widowhood (often discussed alongside the “Four Virtues,”).

everyday internal cultivation of *Ren* (Humaneness) and *He* (Harmony) among broader populations of women (Zhang, 2020).

Nevertheless, Chinese history provides more grounded precedents for merit-based agency. For instance, Ban Zhao demonstrated significant intellectual authority by completing the monumental *Book of Han*, proving that women could command secular, scholarly power (Berkowitz, 2023). Transitioning from these classical precedents to the broader socio-political landscape of modern China reveals a shift toward a humanist reality, led by the CCP's rejection of "feudal" superstitions in favour of pragmatic development (Na, 2016). While the socialist era initially institutionalized gender equality through workforce participation, subsequent economic reforms and the rollback of state services have eroded these gains (Dong, 2023). In response to this modern retrenchment, Chinese feminists are now reconceptualizing empowerment by drawing from both global movements and indigenous, secular, and relational competencies to ground gender equity in the lived Chinese context (Leung et al., 2003). This shift highlights a critical need to examine how women negotiate their agency not through supernatural archetypes or external ideologies, but through the internal, cultivated merits of their own cultural heritage.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the reconstructive approach to social change engaged in by participants. Instead of merely documenting patriarchal constraints, I seek to understand how "ordinary" women engage in everyday social life as practitioners of a Confucian feminist living ethic. This involves actively re-articulating traditional virtues, including *Xiao* (Filial Piety), *Ren* (Humaneness/Benevolence), *Li* (Propriety/Ritual), and *He* (Harmony), to navigate modern dynamics. Rather than rejecting cultural heritage, these women repurpose relational values to cultivate agency and sustainable well-being within their existing structures.

To achieve this, the thesis adopts a specific working definition of social order grounded in social practice theory. Drawing on the foundational work of Schatzki (1996) and Blue's (2019) theory of 'institutional rhythms', I conceptualise social order not as a static, patriarchal hierarchy or structure that renders women passive. The present social order is approached in this thesis as a dynamic 'polyrhythmic ensemble' that also features women's resistive adaptations to power relations. As Schatzki (1996) argues, social order is constituted through the 'hanging together' of everyday doings and sayings. While Schatzki's 'site ontology' has been critiqued for potentially obscuring macro-structural forces such as

state power, this flat approach is strategically employed here to reveal how such power is not merely imposed from above, but enacted and negotiated through specific, local practices within the workshop.

In the Chinese context, this notion aligns with (Fei, 1992) seminal observation that social structures are produced through the widening ‘ripples’ of personal connections rather than rigid boundaries between actants and groups. Although Fei’s concept was originally developed to describe traditional rural society, in this thesis I argue that its logic of differential association remains a vital organising principle in modern urban settings, particularly for older women navigating the ‘concrete ripples’ of community life.

Building on this perspective, Blue (2019) posits that this order is maintained through the ‘recurrent enactment of practices’, resulting in a moving terrain composed of interlocking institutional rhythms. Individuals within this dynamic environment must navigate conflicting rhythms to ensure survival and flourishing. Therefore, when participants align with traditional gender roles, this is not a process of blind submission but rather a form of pragmatic agency. By critically assessing the dynamic social order, these women make rational choices to safeguard family resilience and wellbeing. This conceptualisation allows the study to move beyond the binary of ‘oppression versus resistance’ to explore how women actively negotiate structural conditions to foster wellbeing and flourishing.

Given that this inquiry centres on how specific women navigate a historically structured patriarchal order, it is necessary to first clarify the terminological scope of the gendered identities discussed. While acknowledging gender as a diverse spectrum, this thesis uses the terms ‘women’ and ‘men’ to refer primarily to cis-gender identities. This choice is not an act of erasure but a methodological necessity to accurately reflect the participants’ lived realities. For the Chinese women in this inquiry, gender is predominantly experienced within this traditional binary framework (Wang et al., 2024). Imposing external concepts of pan-gender identity would risk obscuring the specific patriarchal constraints these women navigate.

This inquiry is shaped by my positioning as a researcher trained in Western systems while remaining a cultural insider to the Chinese context. This duality facilitates what Rosenlee (2024) describes as a “liberal exit” (p. 28), where immersion in Western liberal thought can lead an individual to view their own heritage through a detached, often critical, outsider lens. I initially assumed Western liberal frameworks, emphasising individual rights and

confrontational activism, offered the primary solution for gender inequality in China. However, fieldwork and deep engagement with participants shifted my perspective. I realised that universalising Western models, with their emphasis on individual rights, can prove less relevant for local issues (Weaver, 2023) and risk doing more harm than good when failing to account for relational realities. Accordingly, this thesis moves away from that “liberal exit” toward a relational approach to equality. Through the cultivation of *He* (Harmony) and *Ren* (Humaneness/Benevolence) to sustain mutual care, this research offers insights for relational wellbeing that extend beyond the individual to the broader social order.

This shift is particularly vital given the gendered crisis of care currently straining society: a systemic tension where the withdrawal of institutional support has intensified the domestic and emotional labour of women (Connelly et al., 2018). By identifying the workshop as a relational enclave, this study demonstrates how women re-articulate traditional virtues to transform this private burden into a shared ethical practice.

This focus requires re-theorising the individual as a relational being (Gergen, 2009). Identity is conceptualised not as a bounded essence but as a co-constituted reality emerging through social interaction. This aligns with the cobweb self (Fei, 1992), where identity is constructed through widening ripples of personal connections: an interconnected being whose thriving depends on the health of the entire social web. Such perspectives find parallels in Indigenous worldviews prioritising interdependence as the foundation of collective wellbeing. King et al. (2012), for example, describe a Māori perspective where the self is inextricably linked to collective genealogy and the health of the community: a logic of interdependence ensuring both cultural and social continuity. Ultimately, the goal is to shift focus from adversarial identity definitions toward the practical, lived ethics of interpersonal relations: a transition essential for achieving a sustainable form of gender equality where the thriving of the individual is inextricably tied to the flourishing of the collective.

1.4 Research Aims and Thesis Outline

To investigate these possibilities for flourishing within the specific cultural and political constraints of contemporary China, this thesis adopts a targeted theoretical lens. I apply Confucian feminism to a case study of a community crafting workshop in Shenzhen. The

project was developed in collaboration with the participants, who reviewed and approved the research focus (see Methods chapter). Accordingly, the primary aims of this thesis are to:

- Document how the workshop functions as a gendered space cultivated by participants within the context of governmental policies and societal power structures, as well as grassroots agency and everyday relational practices.
- Investigate the participatory workshop as an enclave for communal wellbeing and adaptive agency by examining how collective support, interdependence, and the promotion of harmony in the workshop setting contribute to both personal and communal resilience.
- Document how middle-aged Chinese women embody Confucian feminist values in daily life.
- Contribute to recent scholarship on non-Western feminism within the Chinese context and beyond through an exploration of how Confucian feminist values and harmony emerge within women's everyday ethical interactions.

In addressing these aims, I am to make an original contribution to feminist scholarship in psychology. The study's originality is fourfold.

First, this thesis constitutes my attempt to create a dialogue between recent theorising on Confucian feminism and lived practice. To my knowledge, this is among the first field-based qualitative case studies to apply Rosenlee's (2024) ground-breaking philosophical understanding to the lived realities of contemporary Chinese women, building on previous scholarly engagements with her earlier feminist critiques (see Li, 2025; Rosenlee, 2006; Yuan, 2002). This thesis does not simply use the theory to "read" the women's lives; Rather than treating theory as a template to interpret women's lives, I engage with participants' accounts to consider the relevance of Rosenlee's work for understanding gender dynamics and possibilities for change in China today.

Second, this study offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating the utility of a small-scale, case-based, culturally grounded and ethically responsive approach to research with Chinese women. As discussed in Chapter 3, by integrating insights from relational ethics (Hodgetts et al., 2022; Rosenlee, 2024), participative research praxis (Cornish et al., 2023), and the researcher's cultural insider position (Cassim et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021), I seek to demonstrate how trust-building and co-creation are not just preliminary foundations to my

research. This approach challenges traditional, extractive research models and provides a practical example of how to conduct feminist inquiry in China in a way that respects and honours participants' worldviews, lived realities, and relational values and ways of being.

Third, my reconstructive approach reframes women's "invisible work" as ethical expertise. As detailed in Chapter 3, I use the term ethical expertise to invoke the sophisticated practical wisdom and relational competence required to navigate complex social dynamics and sustain communal wellbeing in China. By treating participants' accounts of their everyday relational interactions, I demonstrate how they forge profound alternatives to traditional patriarchal imperatives in daily life. For example, my analysis shows how participants' enactment of *Ren* is not a dispassionate, top-down duty, but an affective empathy rooted in *Xiao*.

Fourth, the study offers a dual contribution by innovatively linking theory to a pragmatic argument for societal change. The thesis achieves this through theoretical integration (see Chapters 2 and 3). For example, I synthesise Rosenlee's Confucian ethics with Blue's (2019) sociology of 'institutional rhythms'. This novel conceptual combination enables me to explore the ethical challenges and everyday successes of the participating women. Specifically, Rosenlee's approach foregrounds the moral dimensions of their lives, while Blue's analysis provides a necessary lens for examining the temporal mechanisms through which they cultivate harmony in their everyday routines. In the process, I reframe relational competencies, skills often devalued as women's work, as essential human competencies required for the cultivation of a more humane and sustainable social order. Using the crafting workshop as a proof of concept, I call for men to share in the crucial labour of building humane and more equitable gender relationships.

To further contextualise this thesis, it is essential to map the scholarly landscape from which it emerges. Having established the project's aims and originality, in Chapter 2 I review the complex and often contested terrains of gender, feminism, and the enduring influence of Confucianism in China. Chapter 2 then establishes the foundations for Chapter 3, which details the study's guiding theoretical lens, primarily Rosenlee's (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminism, and supplements this lens with Blue's (2019) account of institutional rhythms (drawing on rhythmanalysis and social practice theory) and Hall's (1996) concept of articulation as complementary analytic tools for examining social order in everyday life. Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology, including my case-based approach to narrative inquiry and the relational ethics that guided the fieldwork. Chapters 5 to 9 present analyses of

the women's lived experiences of the workshop and their gender relations in everyday life. Chapter 5 focuses on the workshop and its benefits for participants, and Chapters 6 to 9 focus on the key Confucian virtues that help make sense of participants' accounts of everyday practices of mutual care and support. Finally, in Chapter 10 I synthesise the core findings and outline the study's theoretical, methodological, and policy implications for feminist scholarship and gender equality practice.

Chapter 2: Situating Gender, Feminism, and Confucianism in China

Confucianism is a foundational philosophical tradition in Chinese history, emerging during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) amid political turmoil (Guo, 2024). As local lords challenged the Zhou king's authority, instability deepened. This turmoil coincided with structural shifts in governance and economic life, often described as transitions from slave-based to feudal arrangements, creating new possibilities for social mobility alongside tensions between traditionalists and reformers (Heng, 1974; Hsu, 1999; Zhang, 2020b).

Inspired by an idealised vision of the Zhou dynasty, Confucius sought to restore a more humane and cohesive society. He aimed to achieve this by reviving benevolent values and practices of mutual responsibility (C. Li, 2020; Rošker, 2020). His teachings emphasised order and differentiated roles within familial and social relationships, stressing mutual obligation and ethical conduct. Later Confucian traditions expanded these ideas into more formalised hierarchical structures (Lai, 2008; Nasyanti, 2024). Over centuries, these teachings laid the groundwork for enduring social values and gender roles across Chinese civilisation (Cahill, 2001).

This chapter establishes the historical and theoretical context necessary for understanding the gendered realities of contemporary China. First, I examine the core tenets of Confucianism and consider how these foundational values were historically institutionalised to shape gendered social order. Following this, I trace the evolution of gender roles through the socialist era and post-1978 market reforms, highlighting how political and economic shifts have complicated women's status. The discussion then moves to a comparative review of feminist theories, juxtaposing Western frameworks with developments in East Asia to situate the specific landscape of Chinese feminism. Finally, I argue for the necessity of culturally grounded approaches, establishing the case for a feminism that engages constructively with local traditions to foster harmony and relational wellbeing.

2.1 Confucianism and Its Historical Impact on Gender Roles in China

At the heart of Confucianism lie the core characters or concepts of *Ren* (Humaneness/Benevolence), *Xiao* (Filial Piety), *Li* (Propriety/Ritual), and *He* (Harmony).

Collectively, these hold the potential as shared values to foster a flourishing society built on ethical responsibility and balanced relationships (Yao, 2000). The concept of *He*, for instance, signifies far more than a mere lack of conflict; it envisions a dynamic balancing of differences through mutual accommodation and ethical conduct, rather than enforced uniformity (Ule, 2019).

Despite the inclusive potential inherent in concepts like *Ren* and *He*, a contradiction emerged as Confucianism became institutionalised. Within Imperial Chinese society, ruling elites often selectively wielded its principles, including interpretations of *Xiao* and *Li*. To justify a rigid gendered social order marked by male authority and female subordination (Gao, 2003; Yun, 2013). Thus, Confucianism's enduring legacy is deeply intertwined with both its profound ethical aspirations and its historical role in shaping and reinforcing gender norms, relationships, and inequalities in China. One influential route through which these gender norms were naturalised was Yin–Yang cosmology.

Gendered roles in China were fundamentally shaped by Confucian Yin–Yang cosmology. This cosmology established a rigid gendered hierarchy that subordinated women within a patriarchal social order. For example, Yang (masculinity) symbolised strength and leadership, granting men exclusive rights to lead, decide, and provide, thereby reinforcing their authority (Yun, 2013). Women, viewed as embodiments of Yin, were restricted to caregiving, household labour, and moral instruction. Their value was often measured by their service to male authorities and family members (Heath, 2019). Doctrines such as the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues* mandated women's lifelong submission: to fathers in youth, husbands in marriage, and sons in widowhood. This system harmed both genders. Men faced rigid expectations of willpower and cognitive superiority, which could suppress their emotional wellbeing (Shin, 2018). Women suffered more severe consequences, as they were denied autonomy, excluded from leadership, and subjected to strict controls over their bodies, speech, and behaviour (Gao, 2003).

One major consequence of these gender norms was the systematic exclusion of women from formal education. As Gao (2003, p. 120) notes:

Since Confucius said, 'The virtue of a woman is her lack of knowledge and talent,' women were not supposed to receive education of any kind. Until the 1920s, practically no women had gone to school.

When girls were educated, it was typically limited to domestic skills and Confucian classics. This knowledge was intended to make women better wives and mothers, not independent community leaders (Gao, 2003). Despite these institutional barriers, many Chinese women found ways to exercise agency within their social and historical contexts, navigating challenges and sustaining families (Gao, 2003). However, exclusion from formal education decisively limited access to public power and contributed significantly to women's near-absence from official leadership positions throughout much of Chinese history.

Physical practices like foot-binding further exemplify the reach and embodied impact of patriarchal regulation under Confucian-influenced social ideals. Introduced among elites and later idealised, foot-binding became a symbol of feminine virtue and social status. Practically, it immobilised women, increasing their dependence on male guardians and reinforcing gendered patterns of obedience and self-sacrifice within Confucian social ideals (Ruane, 2020). While some historical arguments perceived economic or social advantages to the practice, its predominant effect was reinforcing women's subordination (Cahill, 2003; Gao, 2003).

This structural control extended into the domestic sphere through polygamy, a strategic tool for securing political alliances and patrilineal purity. By strictly regulating female sexuality and maximising male lineage, the institution tethered a woman's social value directly to her reproductive capacity (Gao, 2003). Consequently, moral worth became inseparable from ideals of silence and chastity, illustrating the pervasive grip of Confucian-influenced norms on women's lives (Gao, 2003).

2.2 Gender in Socialist and Post-reform China

China's socialist era (1949–1976) introduced a distinctly new political ideology for society in general and gender roles in particular. Under Mao, socialist policies within a centrally planned economy explicitly promoted gender equality. Slogans such as “women hold up half the sky” heralded legal reforms in marriage, expanded educational access, and created greater employment opportunities, mobilising women for national development (Hershatter, 2002). However, this declared equality proved partial and ironic in practice. While traditional practices like foot binding were widely discouraged and largely ended, women's bodies

remained sites of regulation and adaptation, and the period saw new physical expectations linked to women's labour (Hershatter, 2002). Breast binding, for example, was commonly adopted by women workers, often with patriotic enthusiasm or for practicality in demanding jobs (Jiao, 2022).

This historical shift in the state's approach to gender equality underscores a paradox within the socialist pursuit of equality. The state's urgent drive for industrial development demanded a massive expansion of the workforce, mobilising women as essential labour units. However, Friedman (2015) notes that this drive operated within fundamentally male-centric terms. In practice, equality was often operationalised as sameness to men. The state defined equality as the capacity to perform heavy, masculinised labour, a standard exemplified by the celebrated "Iron girls" phenomenon. Propaganda campaigns lauded women who undertook demanding roles, such as high-voltage line repair, as the ultimate symbols of revolutionary liberation. Zhang and Liu (2015) observe that progress was consequently measured by conformity to these male standards of production rather than by valuing distinctively feminine contributions.

While this mobilisation opened new public roles, the relentless focus on output often eclipsed concerns for women's specific physiological needs. The state viewed the female body primarily as a tool for development (Spakowski, 2022). Consequently, specific female characteristics were often treated as impediments to efficiency. This logic encouraged practices detrimental to physical health, most notably breast binding (Jiao, 2022). The combination of intense labour and chest-flattening practices frequently led to long-term impairments, including developmental issues and difficulties with future lactation (Jiao, 2022). As Langer et al. (2015) argue, the state framed such sacrifices not as health crises but as necessary contributions to the revolution. In this context, individual wellbeing was inevitably subordinated to the collective demand for rapid national development.

Crucially, historical analysis reveals that women did not invariably experience these sacrifices as passive supplicants to the oppressive patriarchal social order. As Jiao (2022) documents through oral histories, women adopted this practice for complex reasons involving the negotiation of contemporary expectations and national goals. Motivations included conforming to revolutionary aesthetics (Chen, 2003), managing social pressures around morality, or aspiring to a 'female masculinity' suited for strenuous work (Jiao, 2022). Such

evidence demonstrates that Chinese women have always exercised agency, even within restrictive environments, and even when choices were constrained by unequal conditions.

Nevertheless, this agency operated within a system of unequal exchange. As Wang (2017) argues the consistent subordination of women's interests to the state's 'central tasks' ultimately marginalised feminist goals. From an equity perspective, national development should reward such contributions with a future characterised by improved quality of life and greater civic autonomy and decision-making power (Hershatter, 2011). However, the historical record suggests this reciprocation rarely eventuated for women (Jiao, 2022; Yu & Sarri, 1997). Hershatter (2011) argues that rather than achieving a better quality of life, the devaluation of women's contributions ultimately led to a status of "double marginalisation": a status where women were marginalised both by the state's extractive labour demands and by the enduring patriarchal structures of the domestic sphere. Consequently, this era reveals that genuine progress requires more than mobilisation. True advancement demands a system where women's contributions are met with tangible improvements in wellbeing and political status rather than further demands for sacrifice (Rosenlee, 2024; Wang, 2017).

This systemic failure was particularly visible in the domain of governance. Despite the formal celebration of women's contributions to state-building (Wielink, 2019), the political apparatus systematically barred women from high-level leadership (Guo, 2013). This exclusion had profound consequences. As Wang (2017) demonstrates, the absence of women in the Party's central leadership meant that feminist cadres lacked the authority to protect women's specific interests against the state's extractive demands. Such exclusionary structural practices stemmed partly from the lingering effects of historical educational and public sphere restraints on women's participation in civic life, which were only partially addressed under socialism. However, it was also significantly driven by enduring patriarchal attitudes (Gao, 2003; Guo, 2013; Wielink, 2019). Spakowski (2022) notes that the socialist transformation remained "incomplete" and contradictory. Such attitudes reflected persistent traditional gender hierarchies that subtly undermined the socialist push for equality.

As China entered the Reform Era in 1978, patriarchal attitudes that endured the socialist period remained deeply influential (Leung, 2003). Market-oriented reforms created unprecedented opportunities for women through expanded education and new employment sectors. However, these shifts simultaneously interacted with entrenched patriarchal values, often traced to Confucian legacies in family and gender-role expectations, to create

contradictory outcomes for women (Leung, 2003; Summerfield, 1994; Sun & Chen, 2015). On one hand, women entered the workforce in new private sectors, export industries, and service roles (Summerfield, 1994). On the other hand, they frequently faced persistent occupational segregation into lower-paid roles with limited opportunities for advancement (Ding et al., 2009). A significant gender pay gap, often worsened by market-based discrimination, also demonstrated these persistent economic disadvantages (Qin et al., 2016).

Concurrently, a resurgence of traditional ideals, partly influenced by revived Confucian thought, emphasised women's primary familial caregiving duties (Sun & Chen, 2015). This intensified the "double burden" of paid labour and domestic responsibilities linked to *Xiao* (Chen et al., 2020; Qi, 2015). These combined economic pressures and cultural expectations had tangible consequences. For example, they contributed to documented declines in female workforce participation during the 1990s as childcare challenges mounted (Du & Dong, 2013; Hu, 2014). This trend underscored how traditional gender roles were reinforced even during economic liberalisation.

A direct consequence of this era's economic restructuring was the sharp decline in state-supported childcare services during the 1990s. This shift effectively privatised childcare responsibilities, forcing families to rely on traditional solutions. These solutions primarily involved care provided by female kin, especially grandmothers (Li, 2017; Zhang, 2022; Zhong & Peng, 2020). This reliance reinforced the deep-seated assumption that childcare is fundamentally women's work. It trapped grandmothers in intensive caregiving roles and often forced mothers to curtail their careers due to the lack of affordable alternatives (Li, 2017; Zhong & Peng, 2020). Thus, the withdrawal of public childcare was not simply an economic adjustment; it acted as a powerful mechanism constraining mothers' employment and entrenching traditional gender divisions of labour.

Alongside these shifts, direct state intervention in reproductive life via the one-child policy (1979–2016) also profoundly shaped women's experiences. The policy, introduced to manage population growth, starkly revealed an ongoing preference towards male children rooted in patriarchal family structures (Chen et al., 2021; Kane & Choi, 1999; Murphy et al., 2011). Relatedly, the enforcement of the One Child Policy, beyond exacerbating gender imbalances, subjected millions of women to invasive and coercive state-mandated reproductive controls. These included forced sterilisations and abortions, often with inadequate medical care (Davis, 1991; Xu & Woodyer, 2020). This policy placed the primary burden and significant physical

and psychological risks of achieving state demographic targets squarely onto women's bodies (Doherty et al., 2001; Li et al., 2022; Minglu et al., 2020). The focus on controlling women's bodies represents a stark continuity of male-centric perspectives in dominating the social order. Female health and bodily autonomy were deemed secondary to state demographic objectives, reinforcing the view of women's bodies as the principal site for state intervention (Cai & Feng, 2021; Greenhalgh, 1994; Langer et al., 2015). Wang and Zhang's (2022) study on the one-child policy underscores this point, demonstrating that while state-mandated equity can empower daughters within the nuclear family, this empowerment often falters in the broader social sphere because underlying relational structures and cultural values remain unaddressed, highlighting the necessity of a more holistic, relational approach to gender equality.

Briefly, Confucian gender characterisations remain deeply embedded in Chinese society, shaping rigid structures of male dominance within the present social order. These inequitable gendered relations proven remarkably persistent and adaptable. These have endured from Imperial China, through the socialist era's paradoxical equality campaigns, and into the market reforms, which included the one-child policy and the decline of public childcare. Whilst Confucian gender norms have been challenged, their influence lingers in family expectations, everyday social arrangements and practices, and institutional operations.

Efforts to reshape gender dynamics have drawn from various feminist approaches. Some have successfully advanced women's rights, while others have introduced tensions in the Chinese context (Wu & Dong, 2019). As these approaches shape gender discourse, it is essential to examine their contributions and limitations in navigating China's evolving landscape of gender equality. Before engaging with the Confucian feminist perspective that informs this thesis, I will briefly consider Western feminist waves and related feminisms in key Eastern cultures (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese). These traditions are relevant to contemporary Chinese women's lives and to the feminist deconstruction of traditional Confucian gender relations.

2.3 Feminist Theories in Dialogue

This section compares key feminist traditions (Western, East Asian, and Chinese) to clarify

what travels to the Chinese context, what does not, and why culturally grounded approaches are necessary.

2.3.1 Western or Anglo-American Feminism: Evolution and Achievements

Western feminism, often institutionally expressed through liberal feminism, strongly influences international human rights and gender equity discourses, and emphasises individual autonomy and legal equality or rights (Arat, 2015). A common framing of this history identifies four main transformational waves (Mohajan, 2022; Rivers, 2017). While this wave narrative is a simplification, it is useful here as a heuristic overview. These waves are associated with remarkable progress in advancing gender equality, primarily in the West (Mohajan, 2022). Due to the West's outsized cultural and political influence over the last century, they have also shaped gender equality discourse globally, particularly through international institutions and development or human-rights frameworks (Sen, 2019).

The first wave of Western feminism, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, concentrated primarily on attaining fundamental legal and political rights for women (Mohajan, 2022). Its most prominent campaigns centred on achieving women's suffrage (the right to vote), securing property rights, and expanding access to higher education and professions (Mohajan, 2022). This wave successfully challenged overt legal discrimination and laid the crucial groundwork for subsequent movements by establishing women as legal persons and political actors. However, critiques frequently note that the movement's leadership and concerns largely reflected white, middle-class priorities. This focus often marginalised the distinct experiences of women of colour, lower-classed women, and immigrant women in Western contexts (Marino & Ware, 2022).

Emerging in the 1960s and flourishing through the 1980s, the second wave broadened feminism's scope under the banner "the personal is political" (Gosse, 2005). This wave moved beyond the focus of legal equality to challenge wider social, economic and cultural inequalities, arguing that everyday life was also a political site. Key areas of focus included workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and critiques of patriarchal structures within the family and media (Mohajan, 2022). Influential thinkers, including Simone de Beauvoir, provided a theoretical foundation for this wave. Her work, *The Second Sex* (1949), critiqued the societal construction of women as "the other" and advocated for their liberation from domestic constraints and full participation in public life (Beauvoir,

1949). Despite its successes, this second wave faced criticism for universalising a particular female experience (typically white, heterosexual, and middle-class). This wave did not adequately address the intersecting oppressions based on race, class, sexual orientation, and culture (Thompson, 2002).

Beginning in the 1990s, the third wave of Western feminism emerged, shaped by critiques of the second wave's tendency to universalise the experiences of white, middle-class women (Mohajan, 2022). This period's central contribution was the articulation of intersectionality. This theoretical lens was developed primarily by Black feminist scholars and women of colour (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2008).

Intersectionality explores how a woman's position in society and identities are shaped by the intersections of ethnicity, class, place and gender axes of [dis]advantage. These intersections create varying modes of discrimination at the resulting intersections of such factors. This wave therefore emphasised diversity and used intersectional analysis to understand interconnected systems of oppression (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Proponents amplified the voices of women marginalised by previous feminism, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and postcolonial women, thereby challenging any monolithic notion of "woman" (Zinn & Dill, 1996). Third-wave feminists also embraced diverse gender expressions, challenging heteronormativity and rigid gender binaries (Golumbia, 1997).

Although praised for its profound contributions to inclusivity, the practical application of intersectional insights has faced critical reflections (Golumbia, 1997). While indispensable for analysing how diverse women experience compounding struggles, critiques point to challenges in translating this rich differentiation of subject positions (intersections that situate women differently in society) into unified collective action (Ciccio & Roggeband, 2021; Fraser, 2007; McCall, 2005; Wallace, 2021). Concerns have been raised that an intense focus on unique identity categories can inadvertently lead to perceptions of fragmentation. In some activist circles, this dynamic can resemble an "Oppression Olympics," complicating efforts to build broad-based coalitions around shared strategic goals (Yuval-Davis, 2012).

The fourth wave, emerging from the early 2010s, is distinctively characterised by its deep integration with digital technology, alongside an often stated commitment to intersectionality (Rivers, 2017). Digital platforms are employed extensively for activism, consciousness-raising, and rapid mobilisation around issues such as sexual harassment (e.g., the #MeToo movement), online misogyny, and reproductive justice (Rivers, 2017). This fourth wave

leverages technology to foster global solidarity and confront interconnected systems of oppression like racism, capitalism, and transmisogyny (Rivers, 2017).

Critiques of the fourth wave point to the pitfalls of its digital emphasis. These include concerns about “performative politics” or “slacktivism,” where visible online stances do not translate into sustained, structural change (Anderson, 2018; Nguyen, 2024; Rivers, 2017; Ross, 2019). Relatedly, the rise of digitally mediated “call-out culture,” where public shaming can overshadow constructive dialogue, presents challenges. Effectively navigating these complexities, while maintaining cohesive political agendas within decentralised digital networks, remains a key issue for contemporary feminist praxis (Rivers, 2017).

Combined, these waves of Western feminism are largely rooted in liberal thought emphasising individual autonomy and legal rights (Arat, 2015). They have provided essential insights into challenging gendered oppression and empowering women globally. They have driven progress by addressing legal rights, socioeconomic disparities, and patriarchal structures, significantly impacting Western nations and Western-inspired capitalist democracies (Sen, 2019). These movements also offer reference points for other contexts, including China (D. Min, 2005). Assessing their influence in China, however, requires careful or nuanced consideration.

Firstly, the very term “feminism” faced complex translational and reception challenges in China. It shifted from early associations with a potentially confrontational “women’s rights-ism” (女权主义) to the later, more culturally focused “femininity-ism” (女性主义) as scholars navigated various societal political sensitivities (Min, 2007). International norms, often shaped by Western feminist discourses, did impact Chinese laws, particularly after the 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference and engagement with frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Guo, 2013; Jue, 2019). However, the notion of a simple or profound narrative of power transform from men to share with women is misleading. The advancement of substantive equality has consistently faced significant limitations. These are due to China’s distinct top-down political mobilisation approach, state controls, vague legislation, and the persistence of ingrained patriarchal structures (Guo, 2013; Jue, 2019). Therefore, while drawing insights from global movements, Western feminism alone cannot fully address the culturally nuanced gendered

inequalities in China (Yang, 2023). China's distinct cultural, social, and political realities necessitate locally shaped feminist perspectives and strategies.

Indeed, contemporary efforts to advance gender equality in China face distinct complexities. The historical trajectory shows that feminism, particularly when associated with explicit rights claims (女权主义), has sometimes been perceived locally as a politically sensitive “Western” import (Dai, 2024; Min, 2007), contributing to resistance towards increased gender equity beyond just state actors, including online publics and everyday social networks. Feminist activism today frequently meets intense backlash and social polarisation, especially online (Wang & Chang, 2023). This occurs within a society navigating tensions between modernisation and enduring traditional patriarchal values (Guo, 2013; Leung, 2003). Crucially, all feminist work operates in relation to such significant limitations imposed by state control (Guo, 2013; Jue, 2019; Wang & Chang, 2023).

Localized effective feminist strategies must adapt to these combined challenges. This necessity for adaptation reflects a long-standing process of “dialogue” and negotiation between global feminist aspirations and local socio-political constraints. Min (2007) argues that this strategic negotiation is central to achieving effective, sustainable change in China. Such a process involves transcultural efforts (Dai, 2024) that ground advocacy firmly in local specificities. This approach often leads feminist activists to emphasise grassroots cooperation and strategic, less confrontational methods as crucial avenues for incremental progress (Jue, 2019; Min, 2007). To further illuminate the strategic possibilities and constraints within China's unique context, examining feminist developments in neighbouring East Asian societies provides valuable comparative perspectives, including how feminist strategies adapt under different conditions.

2.3.2 Feminist Developments in East Asia (Japan & South Korea)

Examining feminist developments in other East Asian societies shaped by Confucian legacies, particularly Japan and South Korea, offers critical comparative insights for my later exploration of the situation in China. Scholars rightly caution against assuming a monolithic Asian patriarchy (Cho & Um, 1997). However, analysing how feminist movements in these nations have navigated patriarchal structures that have been partly shaped by Confucian

traditions provides valuable lessons for my analysis of China (Cho & Um, 1997). These neighbouring countries serve as useful case studies in the adaptation and indigenisation of feminist thought. They demonstrate diverse strategies for engaging with both global feminist ideas and local traditions (Chen, 2007). Furthermore, differences in political systems, especially the development of feminism within relatively open democratic environments versus more state-controlled environments, help delineate the specific constraints facing feminists in China (Cho & Um, 1997; Chen, 2007). In short, this comparative understanding sharpens our view of China's socio-political landscape and underscores the need for tailored, culturally resonant approaches, such as the Confucian feminism that are required to pursue gender equality effectively in this setting (Cho & Um, 1997; Rosenlee, 2024).

Chizuko Ueno, a prominent Japanese sociologist and feminist, provides a critical lens for understanding gender inequality in modern capitalist societies. Ueno develops her critiques within Japan's post-war democratic political system, which while providing formal pathways for legal engagement, has coexisted with a deeply entrenched patriarchal social order. In her influential works like *Patriarchy and Capitalism*, Ueno examines how capitalism and patriarchy function as interconnecting systems that exploit women's labour. Ueno (1989) argues that sexism is inherently woven into capitalist economies, not merely a remnant of pre-modern traditions. In *Misogyny*, Ueno (2010) further analyses the societal structures that perpetuate contempt for women, examining how ingrained misogynistic attitudes manifest across Japanese society. Her broader research highlights how economic dependency and traditional family structures maintain gender inequities, particularly through women's unpaid domestic work. More recently, Ueno's work has been linking Japan's low gender equality rankings to the interplay between neoliberal reforms and the enduring male breadwinner model. Embedded in Japanese corporate culture, neoliberalism (understood as the subjugation of social life market) structurally disadvantages women, particularly through the unresolved care burden (Sekiguchi, 2010).

Ueno's broader Marxist feminist perspective resonates with elements of Western second-wave feminism whilst offering a culturally specific critique relevant to East Asian contexts (Ida, 2021). For example, Ueno's work suggests that Confucian values, in tandem with gendered socio-economic relations, have historically reinforced patriarchal norms. This is particularly evident in education, where women were either denied participation (see above for an account of this occurring in China) or trained primarily for gendered roles, such as the

“good wife and wise mother” (Sekiguchi, 2010). Despite globalisation’s impacts and awareness of Western feminisms, Confucian gender norms maintain significant influence in modern Japan, even as resistance to these constraints grows (Gao, 2024). The ongoing evolution of Confucianism alongside nationalist movements promoting social change presents a critical challenge: negotiating a balance between cultural traditions and the imperative for gender equality in contemporary society (Freiner, 2012; Pascall & Sung, 2014).

South Korean feminism offers another influential East Asian case for understanding these complex dynamics of feminism within Asian social orders. The South Korean movement has also had a significant impact on Chinese women and feminist discourse in China. Research suggests this influence is sometimes transmitted culturally. For instance, the content and fan communities of K-pop have been found to shape Chinese social media users’ perceptions and behaviours regarding feminism (Jin, 2023). This external influence, however, is rooted in a distinct domestic history.

South Korean feminism emerged from local societal roots and evolved significantly through the nation’s turbulent modern history. The transition from authoritarian rule to a dynamic democracy after the late 1980s was particularly crucial because it created space for growth in civil society, allowing feminist discourse and activism to flourish, influenced by both indigenous contexts and Western feminist ideologies (Kim, 1995; Shim, 2004). The subsequent evolution of Korean feminism is associated with distinct phases. These include advocacy for “comfort women” in the early 1990s, which centred on survivors of the Japanese military’s wartime system of sexual exploitation. A significant “feminism reboot” also followed the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the recent emergence of radical online feminism and the 4B movement³ since the mid-2010s (Herr, 2016; Jeong & Lee, 2018; Kim, 2023; Lee & Jeong, 2021; Min, 2003; Sohn, 2020).

The 4B movement represents a pointed rejection by some women of the gender discrimination embedded in expectations around heterosexual relationships and family formation in South Korea (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Alongside visible activism, this climate has also fostered “quiet feminism,” where women engage in more covert feminist practices and

³ The “4B” name is derived from four Korean words beginning with *bi* (meaning “no”): *bihon* (no marriage), *bichulsan* (no childbirth), *biyeonae* (no dating), and *biseksu* (no sexual relationships). It represents a radical feminist stance of strategic withdrawal from patriarchal social structures.

consciousness-building, often in response to intense anti-feminist backlash (Jung & Moon, 2024). Propelled by these diverse streams, feminism in Korea has contributed to notable changes. These include improvements in women's socioeconomic status, visible feminist influences in cultural spheres, and widespread resistance to restrictive beauty standards (Hamdon & Bintang Timur, 2021; Kim, 2023).

Despite these emancipatory developments, contemporary Korean feminism faces significant hurdles. A primary challenge is the rise of intense online anti-feminist sentiments among many young men. These men often perceive themselves as victims of women's advancement and fuel backlash through harassment and misogynistic content (Jeong & Lee, 2018; Kim, 2021; Koo & Kim, 2021; Moon, 2022). Scholars suggest that countering this backlash requires engaging its ideological roots, particularly the contested notions of meritocracy that underpin young men's "weak-victim" narratives. Contentious debates also exist within the movement regarding strategies, such as the tactic of "mirroring" misogynistic rhetoric (Kim, 2021). Analyses of such confrontational responses, like Koo and Kim's (2021) study of Womad, highlight the complexities and limitations of reactive strategies in this polarised environment.

Simultaneously, neoliberalism shapes aspects of the cultural landscape in Korea. K-pop's promotion of individual success, for example, may empower individuals but can also risk downplaying the need for systemic change (Kim, 2019). Further, scholars argue that militarised masculinity in neoliberal South Korea can normalise sexual violence. Public outrage in such cases is sometimes co-opted into reformist rhetoric that ultimately preserves patriarchy (Park, 2016).

Ultimately, South Korea continues to grapple with achieving substantive gender equality. Deeply rooted Confucian values concerning gender roles and hierarchies still significantly shape societal norms, power structures, and contribute to ongoing gender conflicts (Kim, 2014; Manek, 2023; You, 2009). Addressing these cultural legacies remains essential. Similar challenges regarding Confucian legacies and gender equality exist in contemporary China, though within a distinctly different political context.

2.3.3 The Landscape of Feminism in Contemporary China

Chinese feminism has been influenced by Western, Japanese and Korean feminist movements, and has also evolved alongside the country's socio-political transformations, shaped by nationalism, socialism, and modernisation (Dong, 2023; Hershatter, 2002; Leung, 2003). For example, the socialist era institutionalised gender equality through workforce participation, but subsequent economic reforms have since eroded these gains through the rollback of state-supported services and renewed emphasis on traditional gender roles that reinforce patriarchal norms (Dong, 2023). In response, Chinese feminists have sought new forms of empowerment, drawing from global feminist movements, particularly in the United States, Japan, and South Korea (Leung, 2003).

At present, neoliberal feminism appears as one influential strand within contemporary Chinese discourse, mirroring its prominence in contexts like South Korea (Koo & Kim, 2021; Ye, 2021). This approach merges feminist ideals with market-driven principles of individual success, often emphasising personal effort as the key to overcoming barriers (Li, 2024). Such narratives are evident, for example, in online communities where female PhD holders construct localised neoliberal ideals of having it all (Liu, 2023). However, this perspective coexists with, and is challenged by, more structurally oriented approaches. Marxist feminist perspectives, including those articulated through Ueno's work, critique how neo-liberalised capitalism can perpetuate gender oppression. Ueno's popular influence in China, evidenced by her books ranking among bestseller lists, suggests an active public engagement with structural analysis (Sullivan, 2023). This popularity complicates any notion of neoliberal feminism's unchallenged dominance. The parallel prominence of these contrasting approaches highlights a crucial tension: the pursuit of individual success within capitalist structures may not, on its own, secure genuine liberation or dismantle deeper systems of gender inequality (Meng & Huang, 2017; Qing, 2020).

Meanwhile, the influence of South Korea's 4B movement has sparked heated feminist discourse among some young, educated Chinese women (Cheng, 2023). A particular focus is the term *bidopbi*, which (Cheng, 2023, p.129) notes has circulated with dual interpretations: "do not help married women" and "the unmarried help the unmarried." In this context, gender equity debates can increasingly take on a competitive or adversarial tone, a pattern some scholars associate with broader market logic and polarised public spheres (He & Wu, 2017; Ji et al., 2017; Tatli et al., 2017); Han, 2018). While opposition can be strategically effective, arguably prolonged antagonism risks deepening gender divides, alienating potential allies,

and ultimately strengthening patriarchal structures (Koo & Kim, 2021; Wang & Chang, 2023). In a society that prioritises stability, confrontational tactics can also provoke defensive reactions, making constructive dialogue and progressive change more difficult (Deng et al., 2024; Han, 2018).

From reading this literature and experiencing everyday gender relations in China, I would assert that to foster meaningful gender equity, Chinese feminism needs to continue evolving beyond narrowly individualistic approaches and beyond activist dynamics that centre sustained antagonism. A crucial step is reconceptualising collective empowerment. This change involves actively recognising and valuing the extensive wisdom and practical skills women often cultivate through lived experience and mutual support. These competencies, including relational work, caregiving, emotional connection, and community wellbeing, are traditionally undervalued yet central to human flourishing. Empowerment should not focus only on participation in traditionally male spheres. Instead, it must involve creating structures whereby women's diverse skills and contributions are acknowledged, shared across generations, and fostered as essential human competencies. This vision necessitates a societal revaluation that encourages mutual learning and shared responsibility. It echoes the Confucian importance placed on teaching, reciprocal ethics, and appropriate conduct in respectful and supportive relationships (Mustafa, 2024).

Integrating these relational competencies into community developments, social innovations, and reciprocal family structures is key. Without an emphasis on shared values and equitable contribution to all aspects of life, efforts toward gender equity risk failing to promote sustainable collective flourishing for all. This challenge is particularly evident in China. Research shows men may report greater happiness from certain aspects of gender equality, such as a reduced economic burden (Chen & Zhang, 2024). Conversely, women embracing egalitarian values often experience diminished happiness, facing a clash between their awareness of injustice and the persistent, unequal weight of societal constraints and care responsibilities (Chen & Zhang, 2024). This paradox strongly suggests that current market-driven or assimilationist approaches have not created a mutually beneficial and balanced reality for gender relations in China.

Additionally, this pattern highlights a further issue concerning ethical expectations in gender relations, amid contemporary contestations over 'correct' Chinese male behaviour in relation to Confucian and family values (Louie, 2024): the possibility that weakening norms of moral

cultivation for men may be eroding some of the relational foundations that support reciprocal responsibility. Moving forward, Chinese feminism may well benefit from harnessing women's improved social standing and grassroots movements to reshape the public gender equality narrative (Chen & Jiang, 2025; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). Such a narrative can place wellbeing and meaningful relationships at its core to advance both women's causes and broader societal issues (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Hawkes et al., 2022; Wu & Dong, 2019). Confucianism, with its storying focus on harmony, relational ethics, and moral cultivation achieved through reciprocal learning, offers a culturally resonant approach and vocabulary for advancing gender equality in ways that speak to Chinese social life.

Recapping, integrating Confucian principles with feminist perspectives allows for a redefinition of empowerment beyond mere dominance and competition. This integrated approach emphasises deeply human qualities: moral commitments, compassionate care, and sustainable change. These qualities are essential elements reflecting a shared humanity in achieving social justice and harmony. Through this lens, gender equality evolves from an adversarial struggle into a collective pursuit of a more harmonious and ethically grounded future.

2.4 Why Feminism Needs Culturally Grounded Approaches

Before exploring Confucianism as a culturally resonant approach for feminism and gender equality in China, it is essential to examine a key challenge in cross-cultural feminist discourse: the persistent colonial hierarchies that shape how some feminist movements can be assessed. These racial and cultural hierarchies, established by 18th and 19th-century thinkers through racialised “civilisation” frameworks, continue to influence contemporary discussions on multiculturalism and women's rights (Lépinard, 2011).

Okin's (1999) controversial essay “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” exemplifies this trend in cross-cultural feminist assessment. Her assertion that Western liberal cultures are fundamentally more progressive and evolved, in effect advocating for other cultures to conform or face extinction, mirrors colonial-era thinking (Lépinard, 2011). Okin's argument creates a false dichotomy between Western “progress” and non-Western “patriarchy,”

effectively dismissing the possibility of feminist movements emerging from within non-Western contexts.

Critiques of such universalising tendencies within Western feminist thought highlight a significant risk: overlooking the importance of developing feminist traditions grounded in specific cultural contexts (Breton, 2023; Purewal & Ung Loh, 2021). This is why acknowledging cultural particularity is vital. As Mohanty (1988) illustrates, applying universalising Western frameworks risks creating homogenised and disempowering caricatures of women in diverse global contexts. For instance, Mohanty critiques how practices like veiling, when viewed through a Western lens, are often simplistically labelled as mere oppression. Such a view obscures how veiling in specific local contexts may be experienced by women as an expression of religious devotion, a marker of cultural identity, a form of resistance, or a choice informed by complex personal histories. Similarly, women's roles in religious communities can encompass positions of informal influence or reflect clear subordination, outcomes shaped by the specific histories of those communities. Mohanty's work demonstrates that gendered realities are constructed through, and must be understood within, local contexts (Mohanty, 1988). Acknowledging such cultural particularity is therefore vital for authentic understanding. However, this recognition must not lead to an uncritical acceptance of all cultural practices, as doing so presents its own distinct set of problems.

An uncritical preservation of cultural particularity harbours significant pitfalls. One major risk is that such a stance overlooks or silences existing internal societal contestations about cultural norms. Cultures are rarely monolithic; they are dynamic and diverse, containing multiple voices and ongoing debates about their own values and practices (Narayan, 1997). For example, taking dominant, patriarchal interpretations of Confucianism as the entirety of the tradition would mean ignoring crucial internal critiques. The Joseon-era scholar Yunjidang, for instance, powerfully contested prevailing gender hierarchies from within Confucianism itself by arguing for women's fundamental moral equality (Sung, 2017). Failing to recognise these internal dialogues not only presents a skewed and static understanding of a culture but also critically misses opportunities to support progressive, community-rooted pathways for transformation.

Further, an uncritical stance towards culture significantly risks perpetuating harm and reinforcing deep-seated injustices. Appeals to "cultural preservation" are sometimes used to

defend practices like denying girls educational opportunities or normalising intimate partner violence. Without scrutinising who these practices benefit and who they harm, deeply entrenched patriarchal power can continue to oppress women and other marginalised groups under the guise of respecting cultural integrity (Narayan, 1997). These perpetuated inequalities inflict direct harm on individuals and undermine collective wellbeing. Extensive research, for example, links high levels of gender inequality to a nation's increased propensity for internal conflict and instability (Caprioli, 2005; Melander, 2005). Consequently, the failure to critically engage with cultural norms can have profound, negative consequences for a society's overall peace and sustainable development.

Beyond avoiding these pitfalls of uncritical preservation, engaging critically and constructively with culture holds profound pragmatic value. It offers unique societal resources for addressing contemporary challenges towards greater wellbeing and sustainability. Culture serves fundamental societal functions, such as shaping identities, guiding values, and transmitting knowledge (Kim, 2000). Cultural orientations that foster deep ecological interconnectedness or reciprocal care, for instance, can provide effective, sustainable solutions to global issues. These solutions often contrast sharply with dominant paradigms that may exacerbate such problems.

Worldviews that emphasise the intrinsic relationship between humans and the natural world, common in many Indigenous cultures, offer a profound alternative to Western instrumental rationality. A compelling illustration of this is found in the Māori understanding of gender, which is inextricably linked to cosmology and the *whenua* (land). Western liberal feminists frequently critique the exclusion of women from speaking on the *paepae* (orators' bench) as an act of patriarchal silencing (Mikaere & Kahukiwa, 2017). However, this critique relies on a secular, individualistic lens that fails to grasp the holistic logic of collective survival. In the Māori worldview, women are revered as *te whare tangata* (the house of humanity) and are conceptually linked to *Papatūānuku* (Earth Mother) as the source of all life (Pihama, 2020). Historically, the survival of Hapu and Iwi was a demographic necessity, and because women carry the generative power of nature, they are considered *tapu* (sacred) and must be protected through the division of gender roles between women and men (Mead, 2016). For example, what Western observers dismiss as gendered subordination when many Iwi do not allow women to speak on the encounter space of the *paepae* (space for formal speeches between groups) is actually a culturally specific survival strategy designed to protect women as the

source of life. This demonstrates a crucial insight: local, culturally embedded knowledge systems can offer powerful, effective, and more holistic alternatives to purely externally imposed Western perspectives on the complexities of gendering relations. We gain analytical and practical leverage by considering the dynamics of gender equity through the specific cultural lens of the communities under study. This lens helps clarify what “equity” looks like in lived relationships, how gendered roles are justified or contested in everyday practice, and which locally resonant ethical vocabularies can support change without reproducing colonial hierarchies.

The insight that critically engaging with a society’s own cultural resources can yield pragmatic solutions is directly relevant to gender equity in China. Different cultural orientations provide distinct ‘lenses’ for perceiving reality and conceptualising wellbeing, offering inspiration for addressing complex social issues, including gender relations (Kim, 2000). Therefore, just as Māori reframe the gendered protocols of the *paepae* as a necessary logic of protection and collective survival, the question for China becomes whether our own traditions, such as a reinterpreted Confucianism, can similarly furnish culturally resonant ethical concepts for fostering equitable and harmonious social relationships.

An approach working from within an evolving culturally-anchored tradition may be more effective than solely relying on externally derived universalistic models. These external perspectives often prioritise liberal individualist conceptions of ‘rights’ or narrow economic metrics of progress. Such paradigms face increasing global scrutiny for their perceived limitations in delivering sustainable wellbeing and social cohesion (Becker et al., 2021; Jue, 2019; Min, 2007; Navarro, 2007). Exploring culturally resonant alternatives is therefore crucial.

Recent scholarship has forwarded ‘relational wellbeing’ (RWB) as a holistic approach distinct from individualistic approaches (e.g., Atkinson, 2013; Wesner et al., 2025; White & Jha, 2023). RWB centres the quality and dynamics of relationships as fundamental. It conceptualises individuals as inherently relational beings, whose wellbeing is co-constructed through complex social interactions (White & Jha, 2023). This approach integrates material conditions, relational dynamics, and subjective experiences (Atkinson, 2013). RWB views wellbeing as emerging from interdependence within families and communities, a perspective often highlighted in non-Western and Indigenous worldviews (Wesner et al., 2024).

This non-individualistic and culturally-grounded understanding of wellbeing provides the critical context for this thesis. While the individualistic and Western pursuit of gender equality, particularly regarding socioeconomic empowerment, remains important, this thesis argues for paying greater attention to explore understandings that prioritise interdependence and social connection as co-equal goals in gender equality.

2.5 Chapter Summary and Look towards the Women's Group

This chapter has established the critical conceptual landscape for my investigation of a women's workshop in contemporary China. Global evidence confirms the utility of such spaces for psychosocial wellbeing and social connection (Lenette et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2022). However, as discussed in the preceding sections, Western feminist frameworks predicated on explicit political advocacy cannot be uncritically applied to the Chinese context, given distinct socio-political constraints and relational-cultural realities (Dong, 2023; Mohanty, 1988). Instead, a more culturally resonant alternative is required. Accordingly, this thesis turns to reconstructive Confucian feminism as one such approach (Rosenlee, 2024; White, 2016).

This cultural perspective provides resources for making sense of, and responding to, the dynamic “polyrhythmic ensemble” (Blue, 2019) of state policies, economic shifts, and enduring cultural scripts shaping the gendering of life in China today (Leung, 2003). Against this broader terrain, the gendered space of the Party Masses Service Centre can function as a vital enclave in contemporary Shenzhen, where Party-led service delivery is intertwined with grassroots governance and political boundary-setting (Cai et al., 2023). In this setting, older women may find pathways to navigate tensions between institutional rhythms and relational needs, enabling personal agency and communal flourishing to emerge while remaining within politically acceptable frames.

Consequently, the thesis argues for a culturally grounded approach. Sustainable gender equity in China is likely to require an approach that values interdependence as highly as autonomy, which is central to the reconstructive approach of Confucian feminism (Rosenlee, 2024). The following chapter draws on Rosenlee (2024) to establish the theoretical orientation, detailing how her ethical toolkit elucidates the practice of relational wellbeing to advance harmonious social relations.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Consideration – Rosenlee's Confucian Feminism: A Practical Ethic for Life

Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee's (2024) *Confucian Feminism: A Practical Ethic for Life* challenges the prevailing view that Confucianism is inherently patriarchal and incompatible with feminist ideals. She argues that Confucian values, when reinterpreted through a feminist lens, foster gender equity by emphasising relational ethics, harmony, and community interconnectedness. As an interpretive lens for this thesis, this understanding provides an essential toolkit for making sense of participant efforts to come together to support each other and develop relationships that can contribute to the wellbeing of the group and members. Correspondingly, I draw insights from Rosenlee's Confucian feminism to inform my theoretical and methodological approach. Below, I reflect on Confucian feminism within the context of relevant scholarly trends.

It is worth noting here that Rosenlee (2024) directly confronts criticisms that the emphasis on hierarchy and social roles in Confucianism encourages female self-sacrifice and precludes critique of male dominance (Star, 2002; Yuan, 2002). In response, Rosenlee identifies a "double standard" in comparative philosophy. Rosenlee highlights that feminist scholars routinely rehabilitate misogynistic Western figures like Locke or Kant, yet rarely extend this interpretive generosity to Confucian scholars. Instead of being viewed as a philosophical resource capable of evolution, Confucianism is frequently dismissed as a static and irredeemable patriarchy. Consequently, Rosenlee (2024) argues for the fundamental separability of Confucianism's core concepts from their historical patriarchal distortions. Building on Li (1994), she contends that *Ren* (Humaneness/Benevolence), understood through a care-focused lens, shares fundamental principles with feminist care ethics by linking personal cultivation with social responsibility. Rosenlee's synthesis aims to forge a feminist ethic that necessitates both compassionate personal engagement and structural change, as elaborated later through social practice theory and institutional rhythms, to achieve a more equitable and caring society.

To operationalise this vision, I interpret Rosenlee's (2024) notion of moral cultivation as the development of 'ethical expertise'. This expertise involves the practical, relational competence required to navigate complex social hierarchies whilst sustaining communal and personal wellbeing. To analyse this, I utilise Rosenlee's reinterpretation of four core virtues:

Ren (Humaneness/Benevolence), *Xiao* (Filial Piety), *Li* (Propriety/Ritual), and *He* (Harmony). The following sections explore how these concepts can be employed as practical tools to promote gender equity, beginning with the foundational root of this practice: *Xiao*.

3.1 *Xiao* 孝 (Familial Piety)

Traditionally interpreted as hierarchical obedience and a cornerstone of patriarchal structures, *Xiao* is reframed by Rosenlee (2024) as the “root” of *Ren* (Humaneness). Rather than blind submission, she positions *Xiao* as the primary site for moral cultivation, where the first affective bonds of the family fundamentally shape the ethical self. In this revitalised view, *Xiao* becomes a foundational ethic of intergenerational care and mutual responsibility. This developmental perspective differs from Western transactional models, such as Keller’s (2006) “special goods theory,” which justifies filial duties through the reciprocal exchange of benefits. While Keller prioritises the “goods” provided, Rosenlee (2024) locates *Xiao* within the ontological interdependence of the Confucian relational self: one’s ethical potential is not merely aided by, but constituted through, these foundational care-based connections.

Rosenlee’s focus on *Xiao* as ongoing moral cultivation allows for human fallibility and the necessity of relational repair. Crucially, her reinterpretation transcends passive subservience through the classical expectation of respectful remonstrance. This is the ethical obligation to gently correct parents when their actions are unjust or detrimental to the family’s moral integrity. True filiality thus prioritises the long-term ethical health of the relationship over unquestioning compliance. Relatedly, Rosenlee (2024) draws on the *Zuozhuan* account of Duke Zhuang of Zheng (c. 722 BCE) to illustrate the danger of failing this duty; his initial refusal to remonstrate against his mother’s schemes allowed a rebellion to threaten the state (Ni & Zhao, 2023). Responsible remonstrance, therefore, is an act of care that safeguards relational wellbeing.

Within this system, *Xiao* functions bidirectionally, creating opportunities for mutual moral growth through empathetic and resilient communication. By reframing *Xiao* as a responsive practice grounded in *Ren*, Rosenlee (2024) challenges its patriarchal distortions. In her feminist reinterpretation, this cultivation is a universal human path to moral personhood, rather than a gender-specific burden. This relational view finds echoes in Western

psychological critiques of atomistic individualism and Indigenous worldviews that affirm interdependence as the foundation of collective wellbeing (King et al., 2012; Hodgetts et al., 2020).

3.2 Ren 仁 (Humaneness/Benevolence)

Ren, the paramount Confucian virtue, is central to a gender-equitable ethic. While classical interpretations often frame *Ren* as an elite quality reinforcing hierarchy (Luo, 2012), Rosenlee (2024) retrieves its original universalist conception as an inter-subjective capacity for moral sensitivity. She asserts that *Ren* is equally attainable by women, directly challenging the historical *nei/wai* (inner/outer) distinction that limited female moral agency to the domestic sphere. Grounding *Ren* in the innate Mencian moral heart, Rosenlee (2024) argues that women's lived experiences in caregiving are not secondary but are primary sites for cultivating humaneness, establishing women as full moral agents whose care-work defines the standard for human excellence (Rosenlee, 2024).

Building on this, Rosenlee (2024) redefines *Ren* as a dynamic ethic of reciprocal care. Moral cultivation occurs within networks of interdependence; empathy begins in the family and extends outward, disrupting rigid hierarchical models. This approach centres on embodied relationality rather than detached intellectualism, contrasting with Western traditions of universal duty derived from pure reason. To illustrate the limitations of such detached rationalism, Rosenlee (2024) draws on the tragic historical correspondence of Maria von Herbert as an illustrative contrast. When von Herbert reached out to Immanuel Kant in profound relational anguish following a lost love, Kant's counsel remained strictly rooted in abstract moral duty and the categorical imperative. He reportedly dismissed her emotional suffering as a lack of rational self-control, a response that failed to address the relational context of her despair and was followed by her eventual suicide (Langton, 1992; O'Neill, 2016). By highlighting this case, Rosenlee (2024) argues that a moral law devoid of human warmth is ethically incomplete; a *Ren*-centred ethic insists that genuine humaneness is constituted through these very affective ties.

This vision challenges historical patterns of "righteous sacrifice" previously demanded of men in warfare and women in domesticity. Rosenlee (2024) suggests that when sacrifice is

fixated as a permanent gendered duty, creating a unilateral moral entitlement that justifies systemic exploitation, it ceases to be an act of *Ren*. Instead, she reorients ethical priorities toward reciprocal sustainability, where the flourishing of individuals is inextricably linked to the ongoing health of their foundational relationships. In this approach, while pragmatic circumstances may necessitate collective effort or temporary self-negation, such acts must be sustained through genuine gratitude and empathetic communication to remain ethically sound.

Following Rosenlee's (2024) critique, equality is not viewed through a transactional 50/50 lens, but through a commitment to staggered flourishing. When one partner provides the foundational care needed to facilitate another's goals, *Ren* dictates that this effort must be met with more than mere gratitude; it requires an active, reciprocal commitment to facilitate that person's own future growth in return. This ensures that the success of one individual does not result in the permanent stagnation of another, thereby maintaining the moral heart of the community (Rosenlee, 2024). *Ren* thus emerges not as an abstract inner quality, but as an active, dynamic, and relational practice where the "root" of familial care extends into a public humaneness (Rosenlee, 2024).

3.3 Li 礼 (Propriety/Ritual)

The Confucian concept of *Li* traditionally provided the accepted forms for human interaction, defining roles essential to social order. However, historical applications often reinforced female subordination by upholding the *nei/wai* (inner/outer) distinction and confining women to the domestic sphere (Rosenlee, 2024). When detached from ethical feeling, *Li* risked devolving into empty formalism. Rosenlee (2024) directly confronts these distortions, insisting that ritual practice only possesses ethical validity when deeply infused with *Ren*. This reinterpretation ensures that rules of conduct actively foster empathy and mutual respect. By centring compassionate care, Rosenlee (2024) transforms *Li* from a potential tool of oppression into a vital resource for a Confucian feminist ethic.

Critically, Rosenlee (2024) re-envision *Li* as dynamic, context-specific guidelines that facilitate humane interactions rather than static rules. This approach aligns with historical evidence suggesting *Li* has always adapted to changing social contexts (Zhang, 2020).

Rosenlee (2024) argues that *Li* must follow core principles of appropriateness, reciprocity, and humaneness, allowing for the critical re-evaluation of patriarchal norms. For example, traditional marriage rituals emphasising submission can be transformed into ceremonies celebrating mutual respect and moral friendship (Rosenlee, 2024). Because the outward form of *Li* remains secondary to the inner spirit of *Ren*, it becomes a flexible means for structuring ethical relationships reflecting gender fairness rather than rigid hierarchy.

Consequently, this reinterpreted, *Ren*-guided *Li* serves crucial functions for moral development and social accord. By providing an essential “social grammar” for the relational self, *Li* guides individuals to internalise virtues like respect and care, minimising social friction and achieving genuine *He* (Harmony). This vision of *He* is not a superficial form based on suppression; Rosenlee (2024) acknowledges that true harmony cannot coexist with injustice. This necessitates *Zhi* (Wisdom) and *Yi* (Rightness/Justice) to challenge exploitation. Authentic accord is achieved only when *Li* is guided by *Ren* and informed by *Yi*. For example, rather than following traditional rituals that automatically grant authority to elites, a *Ren*-guided *Li* requires that social rules be co-created through a sense of justice (*Yi*). This ensures that processes, such as how time and labour are shared, are transparent and fair, empowering all individuals to shape a community that serves everyone’s wellbeing.

In addition, Rosenlee’s (2024) adaptable *Li* offers a distinctive ethical perspective for contemporary feminist praxis. Intersectionality theory provides an indispensable tool for understanding overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2008). However, scholarly debates note its practical application can sometimes lead to coalition fragmentation (Fraser, 2007) or unproductive activist dynamics like “call-out culture” (Anderson, 2018; Nguyen, 2023; Ross, 2019). This is not a critique of intersectionality’s analytic power, but a note about coordination challenges in praxis. In this context, Rosenlee’s (2024) reinterpreted *Li* provides complementary resources by emphasising the cultivation of contextual *He* through compassionate communication and mindful reciprocity. While intersectionality analyses difference, *Li* offers a “social grammar” focused on shared relational duties and mutual moral cultivation. By grounding engagement in these duties and the shared project of a caring community, akin to the *Datong* ideal of an ideal society/community featuring equality, inclusion and unity, this approach enriches feminist praxis with culturally resonant pathways to foster collaboration and resist unproductive antagonism (Rosenlee, 2024).

3.4 He 和 (Harmony)

The concept of *He* is an ultimate aspiration in Confucian ethics, traditionally signifying a well-ordered society. However, Rosenlee (2024) argues this vision must be reclaimed from interpretations that imply mere social stability or the suppression of dissent at the expense of women. Rosenlee insists that true *He* is not passive conflict avoidance, but rather a dynamic achievement built on *Ren* and *Yi* (Rightness/Justice). Consequently, conditions of gender injustice are inherently antithetical to genuine harmony. Her vision embraces the classical concept of harmony without uniformity, an approach that allows diverse perspectives, including gendered experiences, to be integrated into a robust societal balance. This integration does not tolerate actions that violate fundamental humaneness; addressing such injustices is a prerequisite for authentic *He* (Rosenlee, 2024).

Achieving this just *He* necessitates the universal, gender-neutral practice of reinterpreted Confucian virtues. Rosenlee (2024) defines this pursuit not as a static goal but as an ongoing, dynamic process relying on empathetic and reciprocal communication to negotiate differences. Within this ethical orientation, conflicts are viewed as “alarms” that signal a need for reflection and relational repair. This perspective encourages continuous moral self-cultivation wherein challenges become opportunities for mutual growth. The affective dimension of *He* is crucial, as it is a state that produces joy and beauty (Rosenlee, 2024). Ultimately, Rosenlee’s (2024) vision of *He*, linked to the desire for *Datong* (Great Community), offers a culturally resonant path toward a sustainable society where gender equality is integral to collective flourishing.

To recap, Rosenlee’s (2024) feminist reinterpretation of *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* reframes gender equality as a fundamental concern of human relational ethics. By redefining *Ren* as reciprocal care emerging from the mutuality of *Xiao*, she shifts the focus from solitary cultivation to relational interdependence, transcending traditional gender roles. In this understanding, *Li* is not a rigid set of rules but a flexible system that adapts to societal needs. *Li* aims to create *He*, understood not as passive conformity but as a dynamic equilibrium where differences coexist productively. This dynamic prevents oppressive uniformity and, in turn, shapes the evolution of *Li*.

Combined, these virtues function as mutually reinforcing elements. They create a sustainable approach for gender equality that seeks a holistic reconfiguration of society for collective

flourishing, rather than advocating only for women's empowerment in opposition to men. Rosenlee's (2024) approach enriches global gender discourse by addressing the limitations of Western feminist perspectives, which often reproduce individualism (Girerd & Bonnot, 2020; Grosser & McCarthy, 2019). Her focus on communal responsibility challenges the historical hierarchies of Confucianism while offering a vision to rebalance society for the wellbeing of all.

3.5 Analytical Extension: Institutional Rhythms, Social Practices, and Cultural Articulation

While Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism serves as the primary ethical lens for understanding the moral dimensions of the participants' experiences, understanding how these values are enacted in daily life requires a sociological understanding of social order. To address this, and as indicated in the previous section, I draw on Blue's (2019) theory of 'institutional rhythms', which synthesises social practice theory with (Lefebvre, 2013) rhythmanalysis and Hall's (1996) work on cultural articulation.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (2013) rhythmanalysis, Blue (2019) treats everyday life as organised through multiple interacting rhythms that take shape through repetition. In this sense, rhythms refer to the patterned temporalities of everyday life, but they are not simply a schedule of activities. Rather, they concern how activities and practices link together through repetition. From a social practice perspective, these rhythms are not only observed; they are produced and sustained through the recurrent enactment of practices and the connections between them, which helps to explain processes of institutionalisation. This approach provides a way to conceptualise how everyday routines acquire order through the temporal patterning of practices.

Central to this approach is the specific definition of a 'practice'. Social Practice Theory shifts the analytical focus from individual minds to the practices constituting everyday life. Foundations laid by Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) highlight how social structures are reproduced through localised everyday human activities or practices. This orientation towards the reproduction of social life through local events is advocated by (Hodgetts et al., 2020), who argue that social psychology must examine the conduct of everyday life, positing that

society is expressed and maintained through mundane, repetitive daily actions. Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002) both take similar sociological social psychological stances to interpreting everyday practices as comprising a ‘nexus’ of doings and sayings, allowing for the detection of subtle shifts in agency within the workshop.

Drawing on Reckwitz (2002), a social practice is conceptualised as a “routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other” (p. 249). Reckwitz identifies these as a block comprising bodily activities, mental activities (such as ways of understanding and wanting), ‘things’ or material objects/actants, and background knowledge or public narratives. Applying this to the social realm, Schatzki (1996) posits that social order is produced through the ‘hanging together’ of these daily activities or everyday doings. Similarly, Hodgetts et al. (2020) emphasise the ‘conduct of everyday life’ as the primary site where order is enacted, modified, resisted and reproduced. From this perspective, societal structures are not abstract forces but are materially and psychologically made real and continuously reproduced through the recurrent performance of shared practices in everyday life.

This orientation towards social practices is vital for understanding how the Confucian social order is reproduced. I argue that the social order in China is maintained not only by abstract laws, but also through the “recurrent enactment” of specific blocks of activity or practices (Blue, 2019). For example, traditional family care relies on repeating specific bodily activities (cooking, cleaning) linked to mental activities (a desire to serve) and domestic objects. As Reckwitz (2002) argues, the individual acts as the “carrier” of these routines and broader ideologies. Therefore, the stability of the Confucian patriarchal order relies on synchronising these performances into stable ‘institutional rhythms’. Conversely, the women’s workshop functions as a site of ‘entrainment’, wherein personalised rhythms of crafting and caring synchronise between social actants (including women), over time, to create a new ‘eurhythmia’ (harmonious rhythm) that stabilises the group against external pressures (Blue, 2019) and promotes collective wellbeing and emancipation.

If social order is reproduced through the enactment of practices, then changing that order requires changing the internal components of those practices. To conceptualise this, I draw on Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation. (Hall et al., 1996) define articulation as a non-essential linkage between elements, arguing that cultural forms have no “necessary belongingness” to a specific political position. As Clarke (2015) argues in discussing Hall’s theory of

articulation, the connections that organise discourse and political subjectivity are not necessary or permanent, but are forged and sustained under specific historical conditions. Hall (1996) illustrates this via religion; while biblical texts were historically articulated to conservative structures to secure obedience, the Rastafarian movement “re-articulated” these same texts to express revolutionary black liberation. The cultural element remained the same, but its linkage was transformed from a tool of oppression into a resource for resistance.

This perspective explains the agency of the women in this study. They do not reject the practice of *Xiao* or *Ren*. Instead, they intervene in the ‘mental activities’ and background knowledge that define them. In the dominant patriarchal articulation, *Xiao* was rigidly linked to unquestioning obedience. However, following Hall, the participants break this traditional linkage and forge a new one, in talk and practice, within everyday routines. As I will show, participants in this research re-articulate *Xiao* to connect instead with concepts of relational care, mutual support, and ethical expertise. In doing so, they effectively detach the concept from its traditional definition and re-embed it within a new, more empowering logic. Through this process, the women constitute themselves as new active agents. They are no longer passive housewives defined by servitude, but skilled practitioners of a living ethic. This demonstrates what Hodgetts et al. (2020) describe as the agency inherent in the ‘conduct of life.’ By shifting the meanings behind their daily routines, the women do not just cope with the social order; they actively work to reconstruct it from the inside out.

3.6 Chapter Summary and Outlook

This chapter has established the theoretical consideration necessary for analysing the lived experiences of middle-aged Chinese women. By adopting Rosenlee’s (2024) Confucian feminism, I have outlined a reconstructive lens that views *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* not as tools of oppression, but as dynamic resources for ethical expertise. Furthermore, by integrating Social Practice Theory (via Reckwitz and Blue) and Hall’s (1986) concept of articulation, the chapter has provided the analytical tools to understand how these values are woven into the temporal fabric of everyday life. This theoretical synthesis moves the study beyond a binary of oppression versus resistance, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how women actively re-articulate their social world. The following chapter details the methodological approach

used to operationalise this approach, outlining the narrative inquiry and case-based strategies employed to capture these lived rhythms (Lefebvre, 2013).

Chapter 4: The Present Study

This study explores the lived experiences and meaning making of middle-aged Chinese women engaging in the participatory crafting workshop. Of particular interest is how participants navigate gendered cultural values, and exert personal agency in the present social order. To delve into these experiences, this narrative inquiry (Bell, 2002) adopts a case-based (Flyvbjerg, 2006) approach. In this chapter, I begin by exploring the methodological basis for this narrative inquiry, which is conducted from a pragmatic constructionist perspective to explore the experiences of the workshop members (Dewey, 1925). From this perspective, human experience is central to social change understood as mediated socio-culturally, inherently relational, dynamic, felt, embodied and cultivated through personal experimentation, reflection, and social interaction. I would add that experience is also storied by participants as they draw on the broader gender narratives of society. This then leads to a discussion of relational ethics as it relates to my case-based strategy, followed by an overview of the workshop as the case underpinning this research. I then consider the fieldwork or qualitative techniques employed to engage participant through participative observations and one on one interviews. Next, I position myself within the context of the research and then consider my process of interpreting participant experiences from the perspective of researcher as bricoleur and qualitative interpreter. Together, these choices allow me to examine lived meaning-making as relational and situated.

4.1 Narrative Inquiry and Pragmatic Constructionism

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that treats the “storied” nature of human existence not merely as a data source, but as a fundamental ontological condition (Clandinin, 2007). It proceeds from the foundational assumption that human beings are “storied beings” who construct and reconstruct their identities through the act of narration (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this approach, narrative is understood as both the phenomenon under study and the method of investigation (Spector-Mersel, 2010). A key assumption is that experience is temporal, social, and place-based; consequently, meaning is not a static truth found within an individual, but a continuous process of “becoming” through the stories we tell and live (Clandinin, 2007).

To operationalise this, I draw on Murray's (2000) levels of narrative analysis, which provide a bridge between individual experience and the social order. Murray (2000) identifies four interconnected levels: the personal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological. The personal level focuses on how an individual organises their life experiences to maintain a sense of self; however, these personal stories are never told in a vacuum. As Murray (2000) argues, they are co-constructed at the interpersonal level through dialogue and are constrained by the positional level, which involves the social roles and power dynamics individuals inhabit. Most critically for this research, the ideological level refers to the broad "public narratives" and cultural scripts that circulate within a society. By using this approach, I can examine how participants draw upon dominant public narratives regarding "good womanhood" or "Filial piety" in contemporary China to craft their own personal narratives of agency and resistance within the workshop space. While distinguishing multifaceted life stories into these four levels involves a degree of conceptual distillation, this approach remains a vital heuristic for untangling the complex interplay between individual agency and the sedimented social order (Wong & Breheny, 2018; Murray, 2021). This strategic use of interpretive lenses allows for a comprehensive exploration of how broader social structures are manifested in individual lives without losing sight of the narrator's unique perspective (Riessman, 2007). This multi-level framing is especially useful given the study's focus on gendered agency within a wider social order.

The compatibility between this approach and the Confucian worldview lies in their shared rejection of the isolated, individualised self. Narrative inquiry's focus on the "interpersonal" and "positional" levels mirrors the Confucian relational self, where an individual's identity is defined not by internal essence but by their position within a web of relationships (He, 2002; O'Doherty & Hodgetts, 2019). Accordingly, Narrative inquiry has been associated with a pragmatic constructionist orientation, viewing reality as co-constituted through social interactions (Charmaz, 2006). This focus on "doing" finds deep historical resonance in the Confucian tradition, which developed not as abstract philosophy but as a pragmatic ethical system for cultivating harmonious relationships (Rošker, 2020; Stephens, 2009).

In this sense, while acknowledging the ontological complexity of social life, I adopt this orientation as a strategic choice to best illuminate the relational meaning-making of the participants. This perspective finds deep historical resonance in the Confucian tradition, which developed not as abstract philosophy but as a pragmatic ethical system for cultivating

harmonious relationships (Stephens, 2009; Rošker, 2020). This results-oriented sensibility persists in modern Chinese discourse, exemplified by Deng's maxim as an everyday expression of practical problem-solving that "it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white" (Vogel, 2011), and explains why Dewey's pragmatism and focus on the importance of human experience in social change found such a receptive audience among Chinese reformers (Yang, 2016).

The crucial bridge between this Western pragmatism and Chinese thought is the concept of 'experience' (Li, 2020). Both traditions reject mind-body dualism in favour of a holistic engagement where knowledge is generated through practical problem-solving of daily life. This convergence is described by Chenyang Li (2015) as a shared focus on the 'art of living'. This provides a conceptual basis for treating experience as the primary analytic entry point. Building on this non-dualistic foundation, You (2020) argues that narrative inquiry is uniquely suited to the Chinese context because it aligns with the traditional project of 'self-cultivation', viewing the construction of a moral self as an ongoing, relational process of narrativity. Thus, the participants' experience is best understood via Li & Samei (2010) concept of 'sedimentation': a layered accumulation where these traditional values and modern adaptations merge to guide ethical choices and subjectivities of social actors, such as the participants in this research.

4.2 Relational Ethics and my Case-based Strategy

Consistent with my methodological orientation towards narrative inquiry as a basis for exploring participant experiences, is the contemporary emphasis in culturally anchored qualitative research on relational ethics, often employing case-based strategies (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Informed by Indigenous psychologies (Hodgetts et al., 2022) and Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, I adopt a relational ethic that prioritises reciprocity and care between myself as a researcher and participants from the workshop (see next section). This moves beyond the distal orientation that often underpins research in psychology to a more involved and collaborative orientation that features considerable time spent engaging and sharing with participants (Li et al., 2021), wherein values such as *Ren*, relational responsibility, and mutual flourishing within *He* serve as the guiding principles for the

conduct of this research, as outlined below. In practice, this ethic shaped how I built access, spent time in the site, and interpreted stories as co-constructed.

By way of background, in the context of social science and narrative inquiry, relational ethics refers to an ethical approach that situates the researcher and the participants within a shared, interconnected space where moral responsibility emerges from the relationship itself rather than from abstract, universal rules (Ellis, 2007). Unlike procedural ethics, which focus on detached institutional compliance, this approach recognises that knowledge and experience is co-constructed through human interaction (Josselson, 2007). This orientation is particularly congruent with the Chinese “relational self”, where ethical conduct is governed by the “pattern of difference” and mutual obligations within a social network (Fei, 1992). It requires the researcher to remain mindful of how their actions affect participant wellbeing, demanding a commitment to “relational accountability” where shared stories are treated as sacred trusts (Wilson, 2009). In this research, such an approach ensures the process mirrors the cultural values of *Ren* and ethical cultivation (Hwang, 2012).

Relatedly, I adopted a case-based strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to explore the narratives surrounding the workshop. Following Hodgetts & Stolte (2012), the crafting workshop that comprises the central case for this research is constructed not as a representative sample of Chinese middle aged women’s groups, but as a specific exemplar, an interpretive unit designed to illuminate how broad societal dynamics are manifested within participant experiential narratives. This bounded case allows for an intensive examination of how older Chinese women in Shenzhen negotiate macro-level forces (Confucian ethics, state policy) within the micro-details of everyday life. By focusing on depth over breadth, the case generates phronetic (Flyvbjerg, 2006), or practical, knowledge regarding human flourishing that is transferable to similar contexts of care and community.

In terms of research procedural ethics, this study was registered with Massey University’s Human Ethics Committee as a low-risk notification (Appendix B) and was guided by institutional principles alongside the relational ethics central to Confucian feminism (Rosenlee, 2024). I consider related issues of procedural ethics regarding participant recruitment, informed consent and confidentiality below in the context of the conduct of my fieldwork in the crafting workshop.

4.3 The Crafting Workshop as the Research Case

The specific case selected for this inquiry is a community-based handcrafting workshop (hereafter referred to as the “Workshop”), operating within this Party Masses Service Centre in Shenzhen. This Centre is an official governmental establishment dedicated to providing welfare services for residents, making the workshop a unique site situated at the intersection of community initiative and state-affiliated space. The workshop is a voluntary, non-profit initiative that primarily attracts middle-aged and middle-aged retired women.

Operationally, the workshop functions as a vibrant hub of both creative production and social connection. Physically, the room is arranged to facilitate interaction. The space features good lighting, air conditioning, and large worktables clustered to allow for constant conversation alongside the rhythm of labour. Figures 1 – 4 depict people in the research site and various crafts produced by the workshop. The core activities revolve around the creation of elaborate handicrafts. These range from hand-woven bags made of fabric or plastic wire to beaded ornaments and woollen decorations. These products are frequently donated to community charity drives or displayed at local exhibitions.

Figure 1 The spatial arrangement of the Crafting Workshop

The spatial arrangement of the Crafting Workshop



Note. It was designed to facilitate both technical work and social interaction.

Figure 2 Display of finished woven handicrafts (bags)

Display of finished woven handicrafts (bags)



Figure 3

Arrangement of smaller artifacts



Note. Charms and hats demonstrating market readiness.

Figure 4 The material repository of raw materials and community resources

The material repository of raw materials and community resources



The workshop's focus extends beyond the mere manufacturing of such objects. A typical session is characterised by a fluid mix of peer-to-peer pedagogy and informal socialising (see Figure 5). Skilled 'master' participants patiently instruct novices, while tea, snacks, and personal stories are shared. This physical setting, filled with colourful fabrics, the hum of machinery, and the chatter of participants, creates a sensory-rich shared environment or enclave of communal care. The women do not just 'make things'; they actively construct a supportive enclave of belonging and purpose with and for each other.

Figure 5 The workshop as a relational enclave

The workshop as a relational enclave



Note. Participants gathering for discussion, illustrating the communal bonds fostered within the space.

Several characteristics render the workshop a particularly rich case. Participation is driven by members' own interests and a desire for communal engagement and shared endeavour. While the workshop operates within a facility provided by the government-supported Centre, it also demonstrates a commitment to self-sustainment through the sale of crafted items at a monthly stall. All profits are reinvested into the workshop, maintaining its non-profit, community-focused ethos. This blend of voluntary participation, altruistic contribution, and creative expression within a state-affiliated hub creates a multifaceted environment. Below, I outline my time observing in this space and how I engaged several participants in this research.

4.4 Fieldwork Techniques Employed

This study prioritised participant experiences through my direct observations over a period of 11 months, the resulting fieldnotes and follow up semi-structured interviews. My role as a participant observer was invaluable for generating contextual understanding and building open relationships with participants. By actively engaging in workshop tasks such as helping with crafting, assisting at sales events, and cleaning, I built genuine relationships to gain an emic perspective on participant's daily values and ways of being (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin (60 to 90 minutes) in settings of the participants' choosing, specifically their homes and parks nearby their homes. As Kvale (2007) notes, the interview is an 'inter-view' where knowledge is generated through social interaction that encourages participants to share their experiences. This foundational principle establishes that the research process is not an extraction of pre-existing facts, but a co-construction of meaning. To ensure this process was culturally congruent, I adopted the approach of *Fang-tan* (Li & Forbes, 2018). The essence of *Fang-tan* lies in its departure from the clinical detachment that often features in Western interviewing; instead, it prioritises a state of 'being-in-relation' where the researcher acts as a culturally engaged insider rather than a distal observer.

Within this relational space, discussions focused on three domains: the construction of the workshop as a gendered space for negotiating policy; the mechanics of communal resilience, and the embodiment of Confucian feminist values in participants everyday lives. This format provided the structure to address specific questions regarding the workshop's function whilst retaining the flexibility to follow emergent narrative trajectory of the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

A core component of this *Fang-tan* approach was a structured engagement with Confucian concepts using integrated interpretive interview guide and stimulus materials (Appendix B). I developed A4 prompts for *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He*, presenting the character, its traditional definition, and Rosenlee's (2006) feminist reinterpretation in accessible language. These materials served as flexible prompts and visual aids to assist in memory recall and deep reflection rather than a rigid interrogation schedule. The process was layered to encourage a collaborative distillation of meaning: first exploring the participants' own understandings, then discussing traditional definitions, and finally introducing Rosenlee's reinterpretation for their critique.

This layered approach allowed participants to engage from their own standpoint first before entering into dialogue with traditional and feminist perspectives. Although the subsequent findings chapters move from the workshop to the participants' broader lives to maintain narrative clarity, the interviews followed a relational logic of conceptual grounding. Only after co-constructing a shared understanding of these core characters did the dialogue move to broader questions regarding how these values manifested in their workshop participation and broader lives.

4.5 Access and Allyship: Strategies for Participant Engagement

Gaining access to the Party Masses Service Centre involved a phased approach prioritising trust and collaboration. This reflects the practical necessity of Chinese relationalism, which is foundational to establishing “one-of-us allyship” and teamwork (Li et al., 2021). To protect confidentiality, staff members and all participants are referred to using pseudonyms. While Centre Leader N was open to the project, Manager MH expressed valid concerns regarding possible disruptions to the group. I addressed this by committing to a participatory helper role rather than conducting formal interviews during sessions or for several months. This strategy aligns with culturally grounded methodologies where researchers must establish trust through “processes of familiarisation” to become an insider who can then work openly with participants (Cassim et al., 2020).

This negotiation enabled deep engagement from May 2024 to April 2025. My transparent role as a participant observer allowed for the identification of potential interviewees based on their dedication to the group. Recruitment mirrored the ethics of community engaged research where trust is cultivated through shared time (Hodgetts et al., 2022). Four in depth interviews, when combined with my fieldnotes from my observations in the workshop provided sufficient information power for the analytic aims of this study (Malterud et al., 2016). These interviews represented a cross-section of the workshop’s roles and domestic contexts. The participants in this study, all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms, represent a range of roles within the workshop and distinct socio-domestic identities. Gang serves as the lead instructor and is retired, while Qiao, a full-time housewife, acts as the co-instructor. The workshop’s logistical operations are managed by Hua, who is also retired, and the group is rounded out by Wan, a regular member and full-time housewife. These roles and identities highlight the diverse backgrounds of the middle-aged women as they navigate care and craft within the Shenzhen context.

Informed consent was treated as an ongoing process built on trust rather than a one-time administrative task. Bilingual information sheets (Appendix A) were reviewed iteratively. The significance of this approach was illustrated when Qiao, following our interview, requested to resign the consent form with her real name. This underscored that meaningful

consent is intertwined with relational trust. Privacy was protected via pseudonyms and encrypted storage of the consent forms and interview recordings and transcripts.

Reciprocity was central to the conduct of this inquiry. I contributed labour to the workshop by assisting with crafting and sales events. Following interviews, I provided participants with gifts of rice. As an ordinary household staple, this choice avoided creating a sense of obligation or disturbing the relational balance between chosen participants and the wider group. My identity as a local resident facilitated access and shared cultural understanding. However, I remained mindful of navigating interactions with sensitivity, using accessible Mandarin and engaging in ongoing reflection to avoid uncritically imposing Western interpretative lenses. This was also part of my reasoning in structuring my analysis in accordance with the core Confucian characters.

4.6 Self-positioning as Researcher, Bricoleur and Interpreter

I engaged in continuous reflexive practice (Finlay, 2002), primarily through dedicated sections in my fieldnotes and research diary and through ongoing discussions with my supervisors during fortnightly meetings. My positionality was multifaceted: I am a local resident and Chinese woman, yet also an academic researcher trained within the New Zealand education system and from a younger generation than the participants. This positioning shaped both access and interpretation, and it required an ethic of “naïve questioning” so that I did not assume familiarity with participants’ historical, generational, or relational realities (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016).

My insider status as a Chinese woman eased access and fostered trust, echoing the relational ethics of community-engaged research (Hodgetts et al., 2014). This aligns with Indigenous research perspectives that explicitly recognise the researcher’s subjectivity and influence within the research process Wilson (2009). However, my academic role and theoretical commitment to Confucian feminism (Rosenlee, 2024) inevitably shaped my interpretive lens. To mitigate the risk of misrecognition and representation of participant accounts (Hodgetts et al., 2014), I treated theory as an interpretive resource rather than a prescriptive template. Regular supervisory dialogue also functioned as an external check on my assumptions and supported sustained reflexivity, helping me to retain the stance of an “outsider within”

(Collins, 1986). This reflexive work was not simply methodological; it was also an ethical commitment to careful representation and relational accountability in writing up participants' lives (Wilson, 2009).

Drawing on Lévi-Strauss (1966), I approached the analysis as a *bricoleur*: an active interpreter weaving together fieldnotes, observations, interview extracts, and relevant scholarship to illuminate the socio-cultural dynamics of the workshop and participants' narratives (Kincheloe, 2001). This positioning aligns with narrative analysis, in which meaning-making is examined across personal, interpersonal, positional, and broader cultural levels (Murray, 2000; Riessman, 2005). In practice, it enabled me to trace how participants narrated their identities and relationships in relation to China's evolving social order and the four Confucian concepts that structure the thesis.

Rather than adopting a coding framework, I made sense of the fieldnotes and interview transcripts through repeated reading, reflective note-taking, and writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2005). For each guiding question, I identified a small set of accounts that most clearly illuminated the issue at stake and treated these as interpretive exemplars. The wider body of fieldnotes and transcripts was not disregarded; it provided contextual detail and helped me refine my interpretations of participants' meanings, even when particular segments were not ultimately included in the written analysis. This broader engagement with the material supported writing by helping me test and refine my interpretations across accounts.

In writing up the analysis for an English-language thesis, I drafted initial interpretations primarily in English to maintain a consistent academic register and analytic vocabulary. To remain answerable to participants' situated meanings, I returned iteratively to the original Mandarin phrasing, attended to idioms and relational cues, and conducted targeted translation checks for key interpretive claims and quotations (e.g., re-checking idioms against the transcript and audio, and revising the English rendering where meanings were ambiguous), treating translation as interpretive rather than purely technical (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004). Crucially, to capture the affective subtext and "tone" often lost in text alone, I also returned to the Mandarin audio recordings to attend to prosody, pauses, and emotional cadence (Poland, 1995).

The interpretive process emerged through a two-part narrative approach. First, I interpreted how participants constructed the workshop as a shared community enclave. Second, I explored their understandings of the four characters by bringing participant accounts into dialogue with relevant literature. In doing so, I drew on Reckwitz (2002) and Blue (2019) to examine structural and temporal dynamics in participants' accounts, and I applied Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism to interpret their ethical orientations. To strengthen interpretive validity, I also examined discrepant or negative cases, which were instances where participants' accounts did not fully align with Rosenlee's theory or with Hall's concept of articulation, and I used these misfits to refine and qualify the analysis (Maxwell, 2013). The photographs included in the thesis also acted as a material anchor; when an image sat uneasily with a drafted interpretation, I revised the analysis to ensure it remained grounded in participants' physical and relational lifeworlds (Rose, 2023).

This layered and iterative approach supported a more nuanced understanding of how women negotiated agency within relationships as a means of enacting personal ethics. Hall's (1986) concept of articulation, for example, helped me interpret how participants detached familiar practices from patriarchal imperatives and re-embedded them within a logic of care and emancipation.

Building on this interpretive approach, I added a further analytic layer when writing the sections on the four core concepts (*Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He*). Specifically, I considered plausible Western feminist readings that might interpret participants' accounts primarily through subjugation, and I then brought these readings into dialogue with my own Confucian feminist interpretation informed by Rosenlee (2024). This process enabled me to acknowledge and engage alternative interpretations without treating either as definitive. Synthesising findings character by character further clarified how participants re-articulated these values from potentially subjugating imperatives into a coherent set of ethical practices oriented toward care and emancipation within the present social order.

Chapter 5: The Workshop as an Enclave for Communal Wellbeing

Before examining specific enactments of *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* in later chapters, I first frame the Crafting Workshop as the foundational micro infrastructure, in the sense of a small-scale support arrangement, facilitating these ethical practices. Concretely, this micro infrastructure includes a stable room and materials, regular sessions organised around shared routines, and a locally legitimate institutional setting that supports safety and participation. Drawing on literature regarding women's spaces as vital sites for empowerment (Jaiswal et al., 2024), social cohesion (Stark et al., 2022), and the renegotiation of gender norms (Lewis et al., 2015), I analyse the workshop as an enclave for communal wellbeing. While the term 'enclave' in Chinese urban studies often denotes social fragmentation or gated exclusion (Gong & Wei, 2022), this thesis adopts the feminist geography definition of a protected sphere of practice or safe space (Lewis et al., 2015; Stark et al., 2022).

The chapter is presented in three parts to show how this enclave supports wellbeing and enables relational ethical practice. First, I explore the workshop as a site for personal transformation and healing. Second, I document the grassroots mechanisms of collective agency, specifically the mutual teaching and flexible governance used to maintain everyday harmony. Finally, I situate this gendered space within its political context to demonstrate how participants navigate a symbiotic relationship with state power.

5.1 The Workshop as an Enclave for Personal Transformation and Healing

Participants' accounts suggest the workshop space functions as an enclave for personal transformation and healing. In what follows, I trace this claim through narratives of renewed purpose, relational comfort, and recovery following illness, before turning to the active boundary-setting used to protect this enclave of care. This space can be read as aligning with a Confucian understanding of the relational self, in which *Ren* is cultivated through everyday relationship. Rosenlee (2024) emphasises that self-realisation is achieved intersubjectively. In this sense, the workshop provides a relational environment through which women can extend caring labour beyond the household, and have it recognised as a meaningful contribution to communal life.

The necessity of this environment for renewed purpose is visible in Qiao's search for renewed purpose. For Qiao, the workshop facilitates a feminist reinterpretation of *Xiao* as an ethic extending from the family to the community. This expansion rests on the logic that the care cultivated domestically serves as the seed of *Ren*, allowing the relational discipline learned at home to be performed in the civic space of the workshop. Qiao reflected on shifting her moral energy from the private home to this shared enclave where self-exploration and personal capacities could be explored:

...because at that time I was home taking care of the kids, and I didn't know what I could do. Mm. So coming here was about wanting to know what I could do, what I'm capable of... Right, it was to find myself, to come looking for my purpose, just to explore.

At first glance, Qiao's desire to "find herself" appears to mirror Western liberal feminist pursuits of individual autonomy (Beauvoir, 1949), suggesting a movement away from the erasure of the agentive self often associated with the societal role of a housewife. Yet, applying Blue's (2019) concept of institutional rhythms alongside Rosenlee's ethics reveals a more expansive transformation. Qiao's admission that she "didn't know what I could do" indicates she was deeply entrained, or pulled into, the repetitive, isolated rhythms of domestic labour, where her capacity for agency was rendered invisible by the monotony of private duty.

By entering the workshop, Qiao disrupts this domestic rhythm and enters a space of collaborative exploration wherein her capabilities are validated by others. This transition does not require her to reject her identity as a mother or caregiver but allows her to expand upon it. Through Rosenlee's (2024) lens, Qiao is shifting the locus of her self-making practice, demonstrating that the ethic of care (*Ren*) is not a static domestic burden but a dynamic capacity extending outward. Her narrative illustrates that finding oneself is not merely about individual liberation: it is a pragmatic re-articulation of *Xiao* where her ethical value is recognised in a broader public sphere.

This reconstitution of the self also creates a distinct emotional atmosphere that breathes life into the personal growth of such participants beyond the domestic realm of the contemporary Chinese gendering social order. Whilst Qiao focuses on agency, Wan's narrative reveals the affective outcomes of participation in a communal enclave:

My biggest reason [for joining the workshop group] is that I'm just happy, I like it, I like doing it, yes... Mm, I just feel so happy coming here every time... Especially comfortable..."

Wan's emphasis on happiness and comfort can be read from a Western psychological perspective, as an expression of subjective wellbeing. In this view, the workshop functions as a site for self-care and belonging (Biswas-Diener et al., 2004). This reading acknowledges Wan's enjoyment as a legitimate personal goal and a sufficient justification for her participation.

When analysed through the lens of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, Wan's experience also highlights the successful achievement of authentic *He*, understood here as harmony grounded in reciprocal relations rather than passive submission. In this approach, happiness is not merely a hedonistic outcome but an affective indicator of ethical success, suggesting that the relationships within the space are flourishing. Rosenlee (2024) reinterprets this harmony as the joyful and ethically satisfying result of mundane reciprocal connections. Wan's word "comfortable" indicates relational alignment. Unlike the friction encountered in hierarchically rigid spaces, the workshop offers a social rhythm where she feels safely entrained, or synchronised, with others (Blue, 2019).

As Snell & Hodgetts (2007) argue, communities maintain a sense of belonging through practices that protect and purify their social environments. While their participants utilised aggressive stylisation to guard their enclave, the women in the workshop achieve a similar collective protective function through a shared, gentle rhythm. Just as the metalheads in Snell and Hodgetts' study found belonging through the synchronisation of bodies, Wan finds a rhythmic communing in the repetitive tempo of the craft. Her happiness therefore acts as an affective indicator, suggesting that when women construct their own relational infrastructure, the result can be sustainable and joyful cohesion. This lived harmony provides the empirical foundation for the specific ethical analyses in subsequent chapters.

This restorative function extends beyond emotional comfort to tangible healing for the most vulnerable members. Fieldnotes regarding Hua's trajectory within the workshop capture this dynamic through a recounted conversation with her daughter:

Hua used to be quite introverted, especially after her kidney illness. Discovering the centre's activities transformed her; she became more outgoing and happier, restoring her social ease and confidence.

From the perspective of Western health literature, this transformation validates the workshop's efficacy as a support group. Research on women's self-help groups globally documents their capacity to reduce isolation and improve psychosocial wellbeing through peer bonding (Jaiswal et al., 2024; Stark et al., 2022). Viewed through this lens, the relational benefits Hua experienced reflect widely documented mechanisms of community-based mental health recovery.

Limiting our interpretation at a support group analysis would be to miss the culturally specific mechanism of her recovery. Hua's healing was achieved through immersion in a new institutional rhythm. By way of context, Hua has experienced a significant illness that had contracted her lifeworld, disrupting her connection to the social fabric. The workshop provided a mechanism of re-entrainment (Blue, 2019), a process whereby an individual's internal temporal and physical rhythms are brought back into alignment with the collective patterns of a social environment. By synchronising her hands and her time with others through the repetitive, cohesive rituals of crafting, Hua was able to socially reintegrate. This illustrates the remedial effect of communal *Li*. This restorative potential also aligns with evidence suggesting that crafts-based interventions can have positive short-term effects on depression, anxiety, stress, and mental wellbeing, although outcomes are likely context-dependent (Bukhave et al., 2025). In Rosenlee's (2024) ethic, *Li* is a social grammar that facilitates human connection. The shared rituals served as a scaffold for rebuilding her relational self.

This restoration aligns with Rosenlee's (2024, p. 63) concept of caring for the caregiver, a recognition that those who care for families must be nourished by a wider web of relations. Hua's social ease is not just a personality trait but a recovered ethical capacity. By engaging in the shared *Li* of the workshop, she moved from the isolation of trauma back into the flow of *Ren*. Her recovery demonstrates that healing is a collective achievement made possible by the culturally immersive articulation of support the workshop provides.

The sustainability of this enclave of care is further validated by the active choices participants make to protect their wellbeing against external friction. Gang's narrative offers a sharp

critique of the broader social order, revealing the patriarchal textures of governance women must navigate to find a place for themselves. Prior to joining the workshop, Gang interacted with a local community administration typical of the top down bureaucratic style critiqued in Chinese governance literature (Wu et al., 2024). This style is rigid, hierarchical, and centred on official authority rather than resident needs. In that setting, Gang faced a community director whose leadership was defined by arbitrary power rather than care (O'Brien & Li, 2006). Access to resources was determined by personal favour: when Gang aligned with a social worker the director disliked, she faced punitive exclusion from community lectures. Gang's response was a firm rejection of this personal grievance:

I signed up [for a lecture], and [they] wouldn't approve it... I said, 'From now on, I won't participate in any activities from your community.' ... So, then I went over here [to the Crafting Workshop].

From a Western liberal perspective, Gang's actions could be read as a consumer exit or boycott (Hirschman, 2004). This reading is relevant, but does not capture the ethical weight of her decision. By confronting the official and relocating, Gang engaged in a profound act of moral arbitration. She was not merely shopping for a better activity; she was seeking sanctuary.

Through the lens of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, Gang's rejection of this unfriendly power is an ethical critique rooted in *Yi* (Righteousness). She identified that the director's governance possessed the form of *Li* but lacked the spirit of *Ren*. By moving, Gang was actively seeking a community structured by a different ethical logic. She chose the workshop because its leaders ground their authority in a feminising form of mutual care. This choice confirms the workshop functions as a voluntary, micro-level realisation of the Confucian ideal of *Datong* (Great Community), where governance is legitimised by the capacity to nurture communal wellbeing.

5.2 Mechanisms of Grassroots Agency: Cultivating Collective Support and Harmony

The accounts shared by workshop members suggest that this atmosphere of support and harmony is actively sustained through grassroots practices. In what follows, I trace this claim

through mutual teaching, everyday coordination, and the relational management of difference, before turning to how these practices consolidate the workshop as a community of practice. The workshop's function as an enclave of care is actively cultivated through everyday interaction, rather than serving as a passive backdrop. In line with Hodgetts et al. (2020), the workshop's supportive atmosphere is made and sustained through grassroots relational practices that extend beyond casual socialising. Participants share skills, problem-solve together, and offer practical encouragement, while also building a collective identity as crafters. These mundane interactions or ordinary exchanges enact shared agency in maintaining a supportive community of practice (Li et al., 2009).

The fundamental mechanism of collective support is a non-hierarchical, voluntary teaching ethos. This is more than a formal rule; it is a lived understanding of interdependence and cooperation. From a Rosenlee (2024) inspired perspective, this embodies a feminist Confucian ethic, primarily *Ren*. It reflects the core tenet that the exemplary person achieves moral maturity by helping others: "in seeking to establish oneself, one establishes others." (*Analects*, 6.28, as cited in Rosenlee, 2024)

As I noted in my Fieldnotes (November 6, 2024), this abstract ethic was rendered concrete in instances such as when the group interact with a newcomer. Rather than positioning novices as passive recipients, established members seek and then affirm the newcomers existing capacities. When one newcomer hesitated, members encouraged her: "Just do what you're good at. You already have the skill, just put it to use." Such interactions and practices of induction to the workshop can be read as unpacking *Ren* and rearticulating this character within a practical pedagogical strategy of inclusion. By redirecting the newcomer from a task she struggled with (beading) to one she knew (knitting), members facilitated agency rather than dependency.

Also, as documented in my fieldnotes (December 18, 2024), members often initially label themselves as "stupid" when they struggle to pick up a crafting skill or task. In response, established group members collectively re-narrated newcomers not as inferiors, but as future facilitators who would "in turn help future newcomers." Such interactions demonstrate that knowledge exchange is naturalised rhythmically within interactions between new and established participants and non-competitive. This ethos was echoed by Qiao during our interview, who described a culture of mutual support where "those who know teach those who don't," and "there's no one who acts superior". Through this commitment to shared

learning, the workshop functions as a site of inclusion where hierarchical distinctions are replaced by spontaneous relational responsiveness.

Viewed through a Western pedagogical lens, what appears is a typical “community of practice” wherein knowledge is distributed horizontally (Theobald et al., 2018); Li et al., 2009. Further, what is occurring here culturally is more than a mere knowledge sharing or teaching strategy. By adopting an ethos wherein anyone can learn and teach, the workshop challenges patriarchal distortions and affirms *Ren* as a universal capacity for growing moral depth through the medium of cooperative crafting. Wan recounted this atmosphere of total accessibility: “None says they won’t pay attention to you... Whoever you ask for help will say, ‘Oh, you need to do it this way.’”

This interactional style fosters Confucian friendship, which Rosenlee (2024) positions as essential for mutual moral growth. Such friendship practices prioritise a shared commitment to moral cultivation over symmetrical equality, allowing for a relational space wherein expertise is shared without hierarchy. While members possess unequal skills, they share a collective aspiration for flourishing, a dynamic visible when experienced crafters re-narrate a struggling member’s status from beginner to future facilitator. Crafting consequently emerges as a social practice central to the workshop’s rhythm (Blue, 2019), through which communal belonging is deepened, and ethical identities are co-constructed as participants support one another.

The lack of competition or resentment that I witnessed during my 11 months observing the group demonstrates a prioritisation of the common good. Gang confirmed this non-proprietary model: “You can’t say, ‘I taught you first, so you all have to gather around me’... whoever learns it can teach.” This perspective offers a pathway to genuine *He*. Rather than the “hollow uniformity” of forced submission to the right way of doing things, the workshop reflects “harmony without uniformity,” wherein women with different skills cooperate respectfully. This voluntary practice can be read as functioning as an unspoken *Li*, reconstructing ritual as a dynamic tool for relational care, rather than following static rules.

This adaptive agency appeared to be most evident in the workshop’s approach to governance. Normative practices or group rules are developed through a participatory process embodied by MH’s leadership, which I identified in fieldnotes (September 4, 2024) as operational, participatory, and fairness focused. Her style is explicitly democratic, as she facilitates

monthly meetings, encourages critique before making decisions, and piloting changes through a ‘learn by trying’ approach. A key example is the “maker number” rule, developed by MH and core members. Under this policy, collective works or those not seeking individual recognition are labelled “0”, while individual works are tagged with a participant’s unique number. This was not a mandated rule, but rather more of a normative proposal that is open to dissent.

While Western theory might classify this as participatory or democratic leadership, the practice extends beyond such categorical functions. Although Centre leaders primarily serve participants, they also manage the workshop by maintaining a collectively agreed rule-set and coordinating resources and routines; participation therefore operates alongside structure rather than replacing it (Wang et al., 2022). In relational terms, this is leadership-as-organizing: an ongoing social process through which coordination and local social order are produced (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Rosenlee’s (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminism offers a further lens by interpreting this agreed order as *Li* enacted through *Ren*, oriented toward *He*, rules function as a culturally resonant moral grammar that enables care, safety, and sustainable communal belonging, rather than as top-down discipline.

This “maker number” rule illustrates this collective will by respecting valid yet different needs: the desire for individual recognition versus the choice to participate solely for fun. By protecting the right to opt out, the leaders nurtured psychological safety, indicating that the group’s wellbeing is more important than a single, uniform policy. This helps cultivate a non-zero-sum enclave where different needs can co-exist, fostering the mutual trust necessary for sustainable development. I am not suggesting this specific process is a perfect template for all contexts; rather, the significance lies in the underlying logic and ethical considerations that are also foundational to Rosenlee’s (2024) Confucian feminism.

Finally, no group is purely harmonious and conflicts do occur. This enclave maintains ‘communal resilience’ through conflict resolution rooted in what Qiao identifies as the principle of ‘mutual understanding’. This practice became apparent to me during the “Chinese cabbage incident,” whereby a misunderstanding over modifying a complex beaded work led to a tense atmosphere. The friction was resolved through direct accountability: the member responsible for the error stated, “Once wrong, then admit it. No hard feelings.” This empathy also extends to integrating difficult personalities as members choose to understand an “impatient” peer rather than ostracising her. This ability to manage friction demonstrates

remarkable skills in asserting oneself while prioritising collaboration. These grassroots practices, mutual teaching, flexible governance, and empathetic resolution, allow the workshop to function as a harmonious enclave of care and growth.

5.3 A Gendered Space for Navigating Governmental Policies and Power Structures

While grassroots practices establish the workshop as a harmonious enclave, its all-women composition is crucial in facilitating the candid disclosures that define its restorative functions for participants. In what follows, I first show how this gendered space brings issues often relegated to the private sphere into the collective light. I then consider how this everyday talk and care is sustained within, and in relation to, the Centre's state-linked administrative context.

In this gendered setting, issues often relegated to the private sphere are brought into the collective light to navigate the state's everyday moral scripts around "harmony" and respectable family life. For example, I regularly witnessed members engaging in discussions regarding intimate marriage dynamics and communication breakdowns that the state's "harmony" narrative often overlooks. More concretely, fieldnotes from 4 September 2024 record a participant noting that crafting was "better than staying at home and being ignored by my husband". In another case, on 14 August 2024, a member felt safe enough to navigate the social stigma of her daughter's divorce, a topic typically hidden to protect family honour.

Beyond these interpersonal accounts, the group also critiqued the monotonous, invisible labour of the housewife role, identifying it as a site of potential frustration that policy often fails to address. These conversations extend to the economics of gender, such as the unequal burdens of pregnancy and the function of the "bride price" as a safety net for female security. This negotiation of family 'harmony' also took an intergenerational form. On 7 August 2024, I noted that one participant revealed feeling side-lined as "an extra" compared to her mother-in-law during Mother's Day. Furthermore, on 9 October 2024, members firmly rejected the cultural obligation to raise grandchildren to avoid the "three women make a stage

play⁴“ dynamic (escalating conflict and gossip), asserting their right to personal interests over traditional family mandates.

The existence of this enclave is inextricably tied to state administrative structures, yet participants actively navigate these boundaries to construct a space of safety. Gang’s decision to relocate following her conflict with a local director illustrates this adaptive agency. She sought a refuge where rituals and rhythms were in sync, choosing leaders who “dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the residents”. However, the relationship with formal state authority remains complex, as seen during the “showcase day” on 5 December 2024 when superior governors inspected the centre. As illustrated in Figure 1, participants co-construct a curated environment that performs a compliant administrative identity while simultaneously preserving their internal collective rhythms. This orchestrated display involved dancers practising continuously to sustain a celebratory atmosphere, while residents hid behind stalls to eat, avoiding any disruption to the formal state gaze. In this event, the workshop appears as a performative bridge between institutional legibility and members’ everyday wellbeing.

Figure 6

The ‘Showcase Day’ inspection event



⁴ Literally “three women make a stage play”, this idiom describes how a small group of women can generate significant chatter or social drama. While often used colloquially to imply a natural proclivity for social complexity, in this context it refers to the structural domestic friction and “proverbial conflict” inherent in multi-generational cohabitation (Hare-Mustin, 1982).

Note. Top left: Dancers maintaining the ‘celebratory vibe’ essential for the event’s success. Top right: A workshop participant (also a dancer) smiling, actively projecting the vitality of the community.

One influential critical reading might interpret this through the lens of performative governance (Ding, 2022) or as a disciplinary spectacle (Foucault, 2012). Such a reading views the curated performances and the concealment of residents as evidence of a coercive gaze that renders participants as supplicants mobilised to enact a sanitised public transcript (Scott, 2008). This script is designed to legitimise state investment rather than promoting the wellbeing of participants. Consequently, the celebration appears as an artificial construct wherein emotional labour is extracted to satisfy bureaucratic rituals.

While this critical lens highlights systemic pressures, focusing exclusively on structural limitations obscures the participants’ relational wisdom. From the perspective of Rosenlee (2024), this performance represents a sophisticated political *Li* enacted as reciprocal *Ren* rather than simple submission. Instead of solely criticising the state’s coercive gaze, it is necessary to recognise the women’s performance as a commitment to the generative process of social harmony, or *He*. For example, Figure 2 illustrates this symbiosis through the actions of Leader N. While representing formal state authority, his role exceeds mere monitoring. On the left, he oversees a flute rehearsal for administrative compliance; on the right, he performs an informal act of care, spending fifteen minutes sourcing bottled water for workshop members. This transition between “monitoring” and “serving” demonstrates that individuals within state structures still participate in the spontaneous relational responsiveness that sustains the community. By synchronising official mandates with personal care, Leader N and the participants co-produce a social order of mutual respect rather than mere compliance.

Figure 7

Symbiosis in practice



Note. Left: Leader N monitors a flute rehearsal, illustrating the “frontstage” requirement of administrative compliance under the formal state gaze. Right: Leader N provides bottled water to workshop members, demonstrating a shift from official oversight to spontaneous relational responsiveness.

This reciprocal commitment reveals ties between the women and the centre that extend beyond pure state power dynamics. According to the fieldnotes, Leaders N and manager MH provide constant *Ren* to members through a deep dedication that transcends personal gain or the intentions of the state. N’s leadership provides a clear example of governance based on *Ren* because MH attributes the quality and funding of the centre to N’s diligent work in securing resources. Despite his high-level role, N remains humble and focused on service to others, running against public and policy concerns about bureaucratic slack and risk-averse inaction among local officials in contemporary China (Chen et al., 2023).

Similarly, MH persists in helping residents despite the exhaustion of managing endless tasks. The showcase day offers members an opportunity to reciprocate this care; by presenting their work and performing well, members are helping N and MH demonstrate success to superiors and avoid professional criticism. They understand that hierarchy, when infused with care, provides a functional scaffolding for communal wellbeing. By participating in the display, they pragmatically secured the workshop’s survival and protected the leaders who support

them by enabling these to meet their own performance targets. Correspondingly, participants in this research do not appear to be seeking an idealised, abstract form of liberty. They are actively engaging in the art of living (Li, 2009) to sustain the concrete relationships that nourish them within the workshop and beyond.

Further, the workshop proves its value by operating in symbiosis with state services, filling gaps the formal system cannot. My fieldnotes document the co-existence of the workshop with *A Beautiful Encounter*, a government-sponsored and self-regulating psychotherapy programme for participants. However, this clinical model struggles due to cultural stigma regarding the washing of “dirty linen in public” and terminology like “psychotherapy” that deters engagement (Chen, 2018). For middle-aged Chinese women who are struggling but not in acute distress, the state’s approach is often of little use. Alternatively, the workshop thrives as a path to wellbeing that carries less stigma, embedding communal support within the culturally resonant ritual of crafting. It thus functions as a vital enclave, proving the practical value of a grassroots approach to communal wellbeing based on *Ren*.

5.4 Chapter Discussion

In conclusion, the analysis of the crafting workshop reveals a sophisticated and resilient community that transcends the definition of a simple hobby group. This workshop functions as a vital enclave where members find purpose, heal from trauma, and secure a space for relational joy. This success is not incidental. It is the result of grassroots agency in action, visible in a robust culture of mutual teaching, a flexible governance model rooted in relational fairness, and an empathetic approach to conflict resolution. At the same time, this enclave operates in a pragmatic, symbiotic relationship with the state. It navigates local power structures while filling gaps left by formal clinical and welfare services.

Methodologically, uses a stepped interpretive strategy, introduced in the Methods chapter, and applied here to keep the analysis culturally grounded. I first draw selectively on Western organisational and feminist concepts (Unterrainer et al., 2022; Theobald et al., 2018) to name the workshop’s observable mechanisms, such as peer-led learning, everyday governance, and boundary work. I then shift to Rosenlee’s (2024) Confucian feminism to interpret the moral logic that animates these practices in participants’ lifeworlds. This sequencing matters

because it lets the chapter acknowledge participants' modern bureaucratic circumstances while avoiding a reading that reduces the community to its operational functions.

Confucian feminist concepts provide the necessary depth by revealing the culturally specific morality animating these mechanisms. Practices that can be structurally classified as participatory management are ethically revealed as *Li* (a social grammar for coordinating relationships). Practices that can resemble compliance can also manifest as reciprocal *Ren* (care enacted through responsiveness and obligation), rather than passive submission. Through this interpretive move, the chapter offers a contribution to global ethics by illustrating a transcultural possibility for humanising governance through relational care.

Ultimately, the workshop functions as a lived instantiation of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, my analysis of which is enhanced by Blue's (2019) temporal insights. Read together, these lenses also recall Hall's (1986) concept of cultural re-articulation. The women demonstrate how reinterpreted concepts of *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* are practical tools used to build a sustainable community of practice.

In the following analysis chapters, I draw on four Confucian characters to consider the emergence of Confucian feminism within participant lifeworlds. I begin with the root of the ethical system: *Xiao*. As the family constitutes the primary sphere of the participants' lifeworlds, it serves as the starting point for cultivating relational capacity. Accordingly, the next chapter examines how the women re-articulate *Xiao*, transforming it from a static demand for obedience into a dynamic foundation for reciprocal care.

Chapter 6: Xiao 孝 (Filial Piety): From Authoritarian Duty to Relational Care

This chapter examines *Xiao*, the foundational Confucian virtue of intergenerational care, and how it can be reinterpreted as an ethic of reciprocal responsibility rather than hierarchical obedience. Drawing on Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, I contrast patriarchal uses of *Xiao* as compliance with a flexible, relational account that foregrounds mutual support, dialogue, and repair. Through four women's lived experiences, I argue that *Xiao* is not simply a constraint to be discarded, but a contested moral resource that can be re-envisioned toward gender equity in familial care and domestic work. The analysis follows four divergent adaptations: Gang's decoupling of care from compliance, Hua's embodied practice of reciprocity, Qiao's conscious pedagogy of dialogue, and Wan's critical rejection of 'foolish filial piety'. Together, these accounts show how *Xiao* can operate as a dynamic practice of relational wellbeing in everyday life.

6.1 Gang's Decoupling Care from Compliance

Gang offers a pragmatic interpretation of *Xiao* that is direct, functional, and centred on capability rather than ritual. Having defined herself as the "disobedient one," Gang strips *Xiao* of hierarchical compliance and reduces it to its essential pragmatic function: "It's just about what they need, you fulfil that need... They need help, you help." This perspective is most powerfully illuminated by the striking distinction Gang makes between routine labour and "care." When asked if household chores for her parents constituted caregiving, she disagreed: "That's not care, right?" For Gang, true care is reserved for acts that address genuine vulnerability or needs that an individual cannot manage independently.

This perspective shifts our focus from transactional and calculated "fairness" to a more need-based ethic grounded in capability and situational demand (Keating et al., 2021). For example, Gang explained that in her childhood home, mundane tasks were distributed based on availability: "whoever comes home early, cooks." While cooking for others can be an act of care, Gang frames it as part of normal family functioning rather than a gendered moral duty. This perspective may also have been shaped by Gang's own experience of receiving specialised care for her disability. Operating from a foundation of security rather than scarcity, she describes family life as a unit in which everyone is assumed to be contributing

their best. In this framing, routine chores are the expected baseline of participation, while moral action is reserved for attending to vulnerabilities beyond the mundane.

Gang's pragmatic ethic distinguishes mutual household responsibility from the deeper moral act of tending to vulnerability. While this stance may seemingly contrast with feminist goals of revaluing domestic work, Gang's approach aligns closely with Rosenlee's (2024) vision of a relational practice centred on responsive action to contextual needs. Based on this approach, *Xiao* and *Ren-yi* (Humaneness and Righteousness) is visible in her emphasis on meeting concrete needs rather than performing compliance. This was evident particularly when Gang reflected on her youth:

Gang: *No, they are the ones taking care of me.*

Interviewer: *You didn't take care of them? Don't you help them with household chores?*

Gang: *Yes, I do.*

Interviewer: *That is taking care.*

Gang: *That's not called taking care, is it? This isn't taking care. That's definitely not taking care. When we went home, those who worked went to work, those who went to school went to school, whoever got home first cooked.*

Interviewer: *You think that when the other person doesn't need you to do something for them, it doesn't count as taking care because they're healthy. So only when they get old and need someone, that's when it's considered taking care of someone?*

Gang: *Yes, exactly.*

This capability-based interpretation emphasises responsive action to specific needs, rather than the fulfilment of abstract, gendered, or contractual obligations (Rosenlee, 2024). Gang's non-calculating approach to responsibility is a living embodiment of this relational ethic, where the measure of virtue is effective action. In this account, domestic duties are organised by opportunity and capability rather than fixed gendered identities.

6.2 Hua's Embodied Practice of Reciprocity

In contrast to Gang's functional pragmatism, Hua's interpretation of *Xiao* centres on the transmission and transformation of a familial legacy. For Hua, filial piety is not primarily a set of rules, but a felt inheritance: "The feeling of filial piety should be like a sense of inheritance or passing on tradition..." Her story is analytically valuable because it shows two layers of *Xiao* at once: a problematic, traditional pattern embodied by her father's role as eldest son, and Hua's own reconstruction of *Xiao* as reciprocal care.

First, Hua describes the problematic legacy through her account of her father as the firstborn son in a patrilineal family system. Driven by a strong sense of responsibility to the wider kin network, he made unilateral financial decisions to support extended family members, even when his own household lacked food. Hua recalls:

Because my father was the eldest son, he was especially attentive to his family, and he had to send money back home first every month... before he could take care of us... Whenever something needed to be bought, it was my father who had to pay for it... My father had to spend extra money to buy [his brother] a new watch, even though we were already struggling... because he was afraid my grandmother would get upset.

This account is not simply about generosity to kin. The ethical problem lies in how care is organised. Hua frames her father's support as obligatory and vertically governed, and enacted without collaborative discussion with his immediate family. In practical terms, the burden is carried by the nuclear household, while decision-making power is anchored elsewhere. Read through Rosenlee's (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminism, this illustrates how *Xiao* can become distorted when hierarchical expectations override relational communication and shared responsibility. Under these conditions, care risks becoming a one-person burden rather than a reciprocal practice that protects the wellbeing of all parties in the relationship.

Hua's own practice of *Xiao* emerges in dialogue with this legacy. On the one hand, she witnessed her father's dedication and the seriousness with which intergenerational responsibility was treated. On the other hand, the meaning of *Xiao* for Hua is grounded more intimately in the concrete care she received from both parents. Her description aligns with Rosenlee's (2024) emphasis on *Xiao* as the root of moral cultivation through embodied, relational experience, carried across generations as an ongoing practice rather than a fixed command. Hua traces this beginning in ordinary, physical acts of care:

When I was little and got sick, he would carry me on his back to the hospital... his feet would get blistered from walking. Back then, there wasn't much public transportation... Then when I started working, he bought me a bicycle, a red one... And when I was working, my mom would ask her colleagues to buy clothes for me... bring back a pair of pants or a shirt for me.

Because Hua learned care through these tangible acts, she was prepared to enact *Xiao* as practical responsiveness rather than ceremonial obedience. When she describes supporting older relatives, and when she describes extending a similar ethic of care toward younger siblings, the emphasis is on doing what is possible in context, while also acknowledging constraint:

I did whatever I could to help... so there wasn't anything special. Taking care of my younger brothers and sisters was also just about working. With only 12 yuan per month... I still had to buy food for my grandparents, and [I bought] pastries or flaky biscuits and deliver them to [my brother]... So my little brother also, when he first started working... bought me a 'shed-bottom line' sweater.

Two features stand out here. First, Hua normalises care as everyday practice rather than moral theatre (“there wasn’t anything special”), while still foregrounding the material reality of what was possible. Second, reciprocity is presented as relational continuity rather than a ledger. Care circulates across siblings and generations, and it returns in unexpected forms, such as her brother buying a sweater when he begins earning.

This reconstructed ethic is also evident in Hua’s care for her ageing grandmother, who had previously carried substantial household labour. Hua frames this not as indebted repayment or gendered expectation, but as a simple response to vulnerability: “At that time, I just felt, ‘Oh, Grandma is getting older, I should do more if I can.’” The moral emphasis is on attentiveness, timing, and capacity, rather than compliance to a rigid role.

Finally, Hua illustrates how this ethic is transmitted forward not through instruction alone, but through children’s uptake of relational sensitivity. The enduring impact of this ethic is evident in Hua’s recollection of her daughter’s early childhood, when her daughter (then only three years old) worried about her father’s comfort on a long bus ride. Through this vignette, *Xiao* is revealed not as a set of rigid rules, but as an internalised way of being in relation to

others, learned through everyday exposure to care and expressed as spontaneous empathy. In this sense, *Xiao* operates as a multi-generational practice of relational attentiveness, continually remade through concrete acts that hold family wellbeing together.

6.3 Qiao's Conscious Pedagogy of Dialogue

Where Hua's perspective on *Xiao* emphasises reciprocal transmission, Qiao develops a pedagogical *Xiao*, consciously transforming the virtue into an approach to parenting that prepares children for independence. Her approach responds to the restrictive, non-dialogical model of *Xiao* she experienced in her own youth. Rather than treating domestic labour and caring acts as mundane chores to be completed, she reframes them as a form of education. Her "letting them be free-range" parenting style is an intentional pedagogy aimed at fostering self-sufficiency. For Qiao, teaching children to manage everyday life, including making mistakes and learning consequences, is ultimately more valuable than simply providing for them. In this sense, domestic work becomes a key site for cultivating competence, resilience, and practical judgement, rather than a background form of women's invisible service.

The ethical aim of this parenting practice, and thus Qiao's modern enactment of *Xiao*, is not to secure future filial obligations from children, but to cultivate children who can sustain themselves:

First and foremost, I want them to be independent, when parents don't need to take care of them anymore, they should be able to take care of themselves.

This expectation signals a shift in the direction of moral responsibility. Instead of centring *Xiao* as the child's duty, Qiao treats *Xiao* as a parent's responsibility to cultivate an autonomous adult capable of navigating the world. Read through Rosenlee's (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminism, this move aligns with *Xiao* as moral cultivation rather than the reproduction of dependence. Qiao's parenting treats care as preparation for moral agency, not as a mechanism for securing future repayment.

However, Qiao's account suggests that self-sufficiency is not, by itself, the full ethical horizon she hopes for. Ideally, an independent child would also learn how to sustain relationships and participate in mutual support beyond the nuclear household. Qiao's anxiety

is that contemporary urban life makes this second step difficult. She worries that her children may become competent at “looking after themselves” while lacking everyday opportunities to learn relational skills through dense, ongoing contact with extended kin and neighbours.

As she explains, the nuclear family structure in Shenzhen, far from the extended kin networks of her youth, means her children lack an “extended family atmosphere”. In her childhood, the constant interaction with relatives and neighbours meant “the people you interacted with... you learned and saw more”. Now, she feels her children lack opportunities to learn “human relationships” through this kind of ordinary co-presence.

This nostalgia reveals the tension at the heart of her reinterpretation of *Xiao*. Qiao can cultivate independence within the household, but she cannot easily reproduce the wider relational ecology through which relational virtues were once learned via dense, everyday contact with kin and neighbours (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This concern resonates with scholarship describing how modernisation and urban change reshape the organisation of family support and intergenerational obligations in urban China (J. Liu, 2024). Under these conditions, distance-mediated forms of intergenerational support can become a practical adaptation for sustaining care across separation, while also reflecting the thinning of everyday relational contact (Li et al., 2024).

In a time-pressured, individualistic world, sustaining numerous ties can feel exhausting, and deeper social connections may feel less impactful than they once were (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Qiao’s concern is therefore not simply that “community is gone”, but that the social learning environment for wider relational responsibility has changed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Liu, 2022).

Qiao’s narrative leaves a critical question for modern Confucian feminism: in a world where the traditional “big family atmosphere” has faded, how can these relational virtues be cultivated alongside independence? Her story suggests one possible path, rooted in pragmatic pedagogy and a clear-eyed recognition of what contemporary social life no longer provides by default.

6.4 Wan’s Critical Rejection of ‘Foolish Filial Piety’

Finally, in sharp contrast, Wan's story presents a more expansive understanding of *Xiao*, offering a compelling alternative to the dilemma raised by Qiao's narrative. Whereas Qiao foregrounds the external environment for learning communal care, Wan's account shows how relational virtues can also be cultivated through everyday family practices, even when a larger kin network is limited. In her narrative, *Xiao* is not demonstrated through compliance, but through sustaining care, discernment, and relational continuity under pressure. This reinterpreted ethic is most clearly illustrated in what she describes as a form of "filial rebellion," where she defied her parents' opposition to her choice of husband:

I feel that my parents are quite open-minded people..., but I have a rather rebellious nature... When finding a husband, I found a man, nine out of ten people said he wasn't good, but I still insisted on being with him... My mother was very understanding, but my father was extremely angry. He definitely wanted to kick me out... Mother absolutely refused to allow that... People said he wasn't good, that this young man was too mischievous and liked to fight... We didn't resolve it; we just got married... my parents ended up treating him wonderfully, and he's been incredibly good to my whole family.

This act of rebellion created a crisis that revealed two distinct parental approaches to family conflict. Wan's father's threat to "kick me out" frames disagreement as a rupture, using the possibility of separation to compel compliance. Benjamin's (1988) account of recognition is useful here. When authority is secured through separation rather than dialogue, conflict is managed by withdrawing relationship rather than staying in relation. In sharp contrast, Wan's mother intervened immediately ("My mom said, 'No, that's not happening'"), refusing expulsion and keeping the relationship intact (Benjamin, 1988).

At the same time, Wan's wider narrative suggests that her father's stance was not simple tyranny. It was a rigid attempt to protect her from perceived hardship. The issue, in her telling, is less the presence of care than the form it took. Concern became coercive control, and that control risked damaging the very relationship through which *Xiao* can later be enacted as mutual influence and repair.

Wan's narrative suggests that resisting "foolish filial piety" ultimately made room for a more authentic harmony. This harmony became possible once conflict was no longer managed through threatened rupture or coercive control, but through the lived rebuilding of mutual

care. Interpreting her parents' rejection solely as an assertion of male authority risks missing the deep *Xiao* that already existed between Wan and her parents. Their fierce resistance originated in a profound sense of responsibility and concern for her future, rather than a simple desire to dominate. Ironically, however, the rigidity of the method they used to communicate that concern risked damaging the very *Xiao* they regarded as essential for Wan's flourishing.

Consequently, Wan's choice to proceed with the marriage, enabled by her mother's eventual support, did not simply entail Wan's disobedience towards her father. Instead, it represented an expression of deeper loyalty to the values her parents had instilled in her. Specifically, Wan was able to look past her husband's rough exterior to discern his essential character. When asked about her husband's youthful aggression, Wan explained that it was not a character flaw but a response to a desire for justice and the neglect he experienced from his mother:

Wan: *Young people, kids, you know, those sent-down youths⁵... who doesn't fight?... He's actually very good, has a kind heart, and is filial to the elderly... They just felt that the person I chose... was always causing trouble... because of his parents... His mother... wasn't good to him at all. She would lock up things in the house and not let him eat them... But he was raised by his grandmother, who loved him, and his maternal aunts all liked him.*

Interviewer: *So his fights were because he wanted to uphold justice?*

Wan: *Yes.*

Reflecting the benefits of *Xiao* within broader familial systems, Wan emphasised that his kind heart was nurtured through the love of his grandmother and wider kin, rather than through care from this mother. Her choice therefore becomes an act of profound ethical judgement rather than romantic defiance. It relies on discernment about what care looks like in practice, and on a willingness to hold to that judgement even when it conflicts with parental authority. In this sense, Wan's "rebellion" is not a rejection of her parents' values,

⁵ Sent-down youth: A social phenomenon during Mao's era where urban young people were sent to rural areas to work and live. These youth were dispatched to "receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants," as part of government policy at that time.

but a more mature and complex application of them, choosing a partner based on a lived ethic of care rather than parental decree.

Inspired by this experience, Wan developed a parenting approach to *Xiao* that reflects a conscious effort to shape her son's character. This approach was informed by the contrast between her own loving upbringing and her husband's tumultuous youth:

I feel my child is very free. I don't demand that he must achieve certain things... but what's most important, number one, is absolutely no drugs. That's the only rule.... Even if you make small mistakes, parents can help sort them out. It's not a big deal as long as you don't have major directional problems.

While this parenting approach is not presented as an objective ideal, it is essential to acknowledge the ethical essence at play here. Wan's approach transcends mere gender awareness by anchoring moral development in relational accountability. This reveals a sophisticated understanding of how individual actions ripple through relationships. Wan frames drug avoidance not as mere personal discipline, but as an act of mutual care; she teaches her son that his wellbeing is interwoven with the lives of his family.

Aware of the challenges faced by a man who once resorted to violence, Wan and her husband collaboratively provide their son with a stable environment designed to mitigate aggressive tendencies. Her pragmatic acknowledgement of gendered realities, such as "being a bit naughty" as a boy, is not an endorsement of violence; rather, it is an acknowledgement that helps channel these propensities through strong moral values and clear boundaries. Likewise, (Liu 2019) advocates gender-sensitive guidance and education for young people that promotes balanced development by guiding all children toward becoming more rounded persons who embody the best of both traditionally masculine and feminine virtues. By adopting this lens, Wan's approach is to nurture her son's behaviour constructively rather than suppressing it.

The success of Wan's parenting strategy is powerfully illustrated by an incident involving a taxi driver. In contrast to his father's actions at a similar age, her son made a conscious choice to refrain from violence when his friends attempted to escalate a dispute into a physical fight. When asked for a memorable example of setting boundaries while allowing for learning, Wan recounted the story:

They got into a fight with the driver, but my son didn't fight... he knows fighting is wrong... Later I asked him what happened and he said: 'They wouldn't pay the driver... I didn't say anything, I just stood by watching while they fought.' He also told me what they did wasn't right. Afterward, I told him: 'Try not to hang out with them anymore.'

This was a critical moment where, under direct peer pressure, her son upheld the ethical standard instilled in him. Instead of punishment for being present, Wan and her husband offered empathy and trust, reinforcing his moral choice. Their approach mirrors findings from Mahalik (2022) and Singh (2024), where boys condemned violence, and where connecting masculinity to community healing offers an alternative to personal toughness. By providing the nurturing environment her husband lacked, they broke a potential cycle of aggression. Wan's influence as her son's "first teacher" successfully cultivated a masculine identity centred on ethical integrity and relational ethics rather than physical dominance.

Further, their approach is symbolised by a simple, recurring act: her son accompanying her every night to take out the trash. Living on the seventh floor without an elevator, the daily walk to the collection point is a significant commitment. As Wan proudly notes, it is a rare display of devotion; this walk is not a chore performed out of duty, but a chosen act of companionship. As Benjamin (1988) argues, a relational model finding meaning in mutual recognition stands in direct opposition to a traditional masculinity built on separation and control. It is the living embodiment of Wan's definition of a "good" child: one who provides presence, companionship, and familial care. Her approach to parental care focuses on letting their son make "reasonable mistakes" so he can learn for himself and figure out why things matter. Wan confirmed that this fosters an "incredibly well" relationship, adding that they get along remarkably. The reward sought is not the social status of an obedient son, but the genuine happiness derived from loving, harmonious relations. When reinterpreted this way, *Xiao* becomes a powerful tool for cultivating a world in which mutual care, not hierarchy, is the ultimate measure of good familial relations. Wan's approach introduces careful, relational joy as a feminist alternative to dominance. The goal of her filial practice is not obedience, but the simple, profound happiness of being together, as expressed by her mother's wish to just "see you all come back."

6.5 Chapter Discussion

This chapter suggests that the women's divergent pathways emerge from a shared cultural memory of traditional *Xiao* as strict, hierarchical, and ritualistic familial demands. Hua recalls how filial piety required meticulous, observable conduct: "you had to get off your bicycle when you saw your parents... no matter how much of a hurry you were in." This situates *Xiao* close to *Li*, where respect is enacted through visible forms. Wan echoes this, explaining how she and her siblings "never spoke loudly" to their parents. Such accounts highlight how *Xiao* was commonly consolidated through *tinghua*, often translated as obedience. In everyday environments where families perceive individual behaviour as carrying collective consequences, compliance can function as a protective strategy that reduces the risk of reputational damage, conflict, or institutional repercussions. Yet, while rooted in a logic of care, this protective stance can also stabilise a relational hierarchy in which dialogue is precluded. Qiao's summary, "didn't dare to ask why," captures this monological model that Rosenlee (2024) argues must be transformed.

Across the accounts, the women do not simply discard *Xiao* but refuse to reduce it to compliance. Their stories show how the gendered expectation that women must carry care through obedience can be reworked into more reciprocal, context-responsive practices. Gang's self-identification as a "rebel" precisely because she was disobedient to her parents illustrates the force of the compliant ideal they are now moving beyond. Wan similarly rejects "foolish filial piety" as a demand for self-erasure, without rejecting care itself. Gang also decouples care from compliance, reimagining *Xiao* as practical responsiveness: "It's just giving them what they need." Qiao's narrative makes this shift especially clear. Her upbringing was defined by "not daring to ask," whereas her parenting practice invites questions and explanation, positioning dialogue as part of care rather than a threat to respect.

Taken together, these pathways converge on a rearticulation of *Xiao* from hierarchical duty into a dynamic relational practice. This transformation aligns with the core tenets of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism. Rather than excising obedience as if it were separable from care, the women loosen the demand for unquestioning compliance and re-centre relational responsibility, allowing care to be expressed through reciprocity, discernment, and communicative repair. This shift also responds to the legacy of unilateral burden, such as the isolating sacrifices made by Hua's father. In contrast, Wan's pursuit of relational joy stands as a feminist counter-narrative to patriarchal paradigms in which self-

worth is derived from dominance. Qiao's insistence on dialogue invests in long-term moral character development. Gang's practical support works to build durable trust. Hua's reciprocal empathy reflects advanced situational awareness and attention to constraint.

Overall, the rearticulation of *Xiao* evident in this chapter embodies powerful everyday feminist practices that illustrate how family relationships can remain a key site in the gender dynamics of the present social order (Rosenlee, 2024). As a revitalised virtue, *Xiao* may comprise an initial step toward extending a just ethic into the wider community. As *Xiao* serves as a generative source of care, the following chapter explores how the women translate intimate familial skills into a shared capacity for humane action that cultivates *Ren*.

Chapter 7: Ren 仁 (Humaneness/Benevolence) - *From Gendered Duty to a Shared Ethic of Humane Action*

This chapter examines *Ren*, the central virtue of Confucian ethics, and how it can be reclaimed as a shared human capacity rather than a gendered obligation. Drawing on Rosenlee's (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminism, I contrast androcentric interpretations of *Ren* with a relational account that centres compassion, moral sensitivity, and reciprocal responsibility. Through the lived experiences of four women in the crafting workshop, I argue that *Ren* becomes legible as a practical ethic that is cultivated in everyday relationships, and that should be expected of all, not naturalised as women's work. The chapter traces four distinct pathways of humane action: Hua's infrastructural community-building, Qiao's collaborative compassion, Wan's practice of irreplaceable companionship, and Gang's fierce, protective justice. Together, these narratives reframe relational care as ethical expertise and as essential human work for a more humane and equitable social order.

7.1 Hua's infrastructural work of community-building

Our journey into re-interpretations of *Ren* begins with Hua, whose story shows how humaneness and benevolence are cultivated through everyday arrangements of community-building. I use the term *infrastructural work* to refer to the routine, often invisible labour that organises people, resources, and obligations so that mutual care can reliably happen (Star, 1999). In Hua's case, this includes the everyday kin support she sustained in Shenzhen, as well as the way she maintains reciprocal ties through hosting, coordination, and practical help.

While initially expressing unfamiliarity with the formal term, her life story is a testament to values associated with *Ren*. When asked to share her understanding, Hua defines *Ren* not through classical philosophy but through the accessible terms of "benevolence" and "humane love":

This character 'ren' is what we understand as benevolence, humane love, possibly something like that, right?

This understanding of *Ren* contrasts with Hua's experience in the world of paid labour. When asked about workplace benevolence, Hua laughed, highlighting the gap between Confucian ideals and contemporary reality. She notes that mutual help vanished in the competitive environment of the Chinese economic reforms. Hua illustrates this deficit, in part, through shifting social dynamics in Shenzhen:

Back then we could still help each other, at that time there weren't any monetary interests involved yet. Later... it wasn't like that anymore... It was very hard, there was no help.

Hua's recollection of relations becoming "about money" can be read as a local effect of marketisation, in which everyday cooperation becomes harder to sustain under competitive pressures and rising monetary stakes (Yan, 2010). This context matters for Hua's infrastructural work, because it shapes the conditions under which routines of mutual help can be organised and maintained. Hua's story suggests that Shenzhen's reform-era labour environment may have actively crowded out the practice of *Ren*, even while rewarding hard work. When survival and profit are the primary metrics of success, the space for benevolence and humane love withers (Gao, 2021; Mercier & Deslandes, 2020).

Because helping requires the deliberate allocation of time and resources (Hochschild & Machung, 2003), Hua's account implies that *Ren* is not merely an individual trait, but is contingent upon whether surrounding social and economic rhythms make mutual aid practically feasible (Blue, 2019). This dynamic is consistent with research showing that economic institutions can reshape social preferences and norms (Bowles, 1998), and that material insecurity can narrow practical attention and undermine relational bandwidth for care (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014).

Hua's experience suggests that *Ren* is not merely an individual character trait. It is a virtue that depends on stable relational arrangements, including routines of hosting, shared norms of reciprocity, and material security that makes helping feasible.

Against this backdrop, Hua's practice of *Ren* becomes something she sustains locally and deliberately in a small, dependable circle, rather than something she can expect from the wider workplace or city. In direct contrast to the competitive external world, her home in Shenzhen became the primary site where she could cultivate *Ren*. In my analysis, Hua's

“inner strength” refers to her practical capacity to endure, coordinate, and keep relationships live under conditions of precarity by sustaining a small, dependable circle of care. For example, when asked to recall this strength through family care, Hua provided a consistent example from her early life in Shenzhen:

Yes, when I first came to Shenzhen... I used to live in a workers' dormitory. My two younger brothers... were living in dormitories too, and they would come on weekends, usually to my place for meals. Later, after they had their own families, they would still come over on weekends.

Hua is pragmatic regarding *Ren*, which is articulated in her narratives as an adaptive strategy for mutual care and familial migrant survival. Living in worker dormitories establishes a context of economic precarity where caregiving becomes a vital strategy for collective survival; providing regular meals was a way to pool resources, ensure her brothers' wellbeing, and maintain a familial support system in an alienating city.

One can apply a critical feminist lens to reveal the potentially gendered nature of this survival strategy. From this perspective, Hua, as the sister, appears to have automatically assumed the role of domestic anchor. Her invisible labour is presented as unremarkable, which may suggest an internalised script where value is tied to the ability to serve (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023; Singh & Pattanaik, 2020). Through this interpretive lens, the “inner strength” she describes is seen as being forged in response to a structurally unequal burden of care.

Our dialogue further reveals this asymmetrically gendered care relationship. When asked about reciprocity, Hua candidly shares:

I took care of them more, [for me] the care was ordinary, later when I had a kidney transplant and got sick, they lessened my burden, they came less often, I didn't mind.

On Hua's telling, their reduced visits functioned as consideration. Yet this consideration also underscores a limit: relief was achieved by withdrawing from the routines she previously hosted, rather than by men taking up the work of care themselves. A feminist critique highlights a structural tension here: the care Hua treats as ordinary is enabled by a gendered division of labour that makes women's contribution appear natural and men's participation optional. Her brothers simply “coming over less often” highlights a system where the bar for

male participation in benevolent care is set lower than what is normative for women (Daniele, 2021). This unequal burden is further illustrated by the expansive nature of Hua's care work for her husband's family:

Hua: ...Yes, it just felt like something I should do, that kind of thing. Hmm... so we had a shop in Shekou. When my nephews came down to find work, they all stayed at my place. I had to take care of them, washing clothes, cooking. I definitely had to take care of them, and you know the youngest nephew, from when he was fifteen-or-sixteen years old right after graduation, do you know how long he followed me? He followed me until he was over 30, married with children, and he still came.

Interviewer: He's like your son. Really, very much like it.

Hua: Ah, he also has a good conscience. Sometimes when he comes to hang out with friends [around my area], he says, "I want to go see my aunt." ... He's still pretty good, sometimes he calls to check in, and I would say "You and your mom can come down anytime, come stay at my place."

Hua's account reinforces feminist observations about the "super-woman" burden. She was expected to provide seemingly limitless domestic labour across multiple family lines in a gendered system that depended on her inexhaustible capacity for provide familial care (Hirani & Ahmad, 2025).

When I asked what this lifetime of caregiving has given her, Hua's answer was simple and profound, revealing a worldview centred on relational security, not material exchange:

I just feel that I took care of them, and they haven't forgotten me, that's it.

This deep sense of fulfilment is revealed to be an active ethical commitment, not a passive acceptance of a gendered role. This is illustrated in a final story about caring for her mother-in-law, despite the barriers of distance and language:

Hua: ...Like the people in my family, whether it's my mother-in-law or my aunt, they are all very polite to me, because I took care of them, although I don't often go back, and we don't speak the same language. When my mother-in-law was sick, I still managed to take care of her. Ah, because I felt that I hadn't taken care of her regularly, so that last month. Stayed in a hotel, took care of her.

Interviewer: *This kind of care is not what people call moral kidnapping.*

Hua: *No, it's not.*

Interviewer: *I think it's that you yourself believe this kind of care is your personal moral standard.*

Hua: *Yes.*

This exchange offers a profound statement of Hua's ethical autonomy. Her rejection of external pressure suggests she is a self-aware moral agent consciously choosing to live by her own demanding moral standards rather than merely fulfilling an internalised gendered script.

While a critical feminist lens reveals structural burdens imposed on Hua, drawing on Rosenlee's (2024) perspective can also highlight the unique agency in Hua's actions. Her strength derives from the relational power cultivated through benevolent acts; by becoming an indispensable hub of care, she establishes herself as a matriarchal anchor. This represents a world-building power based on being essential to others rather than on dominance. Within this understanding, Hua's sacrifice is reframed as a pedagogical project where satisfaction comes from the moral cultivation of the next generation, evidenced by her nephew's "good conscience."

Hua's narrative celebrates her pride in caregiving whilst exposing the fragility of the reciprocal sustainability discussed in Chapter 3. Significantly, Hua herself never uses the term "sacrifice" to describe her decades of familial labour. This linguistic choice aligns with the epistemology of *Ren* explored in Chapter 3, where care is viewed as a relational necessity. For Hua, providing meals or nursing a sick family member is an expression of her "personal moral standard" rather than a transactional trade-off. This creates a striking parallel with Rosenlee's (2024) own philosophical reflections on caring for her mother-in-law. Both the participant and the author reject the framing of such labour as a loss of autonomy, re-articulating it instead as a site of ethical agency where the practice of *Ren* is authored by the woman herself.

Even if the label is absent, Hua's actions possess clear aspects of sacrifice that reveal a breakdown of the Confucian ideal. During her kidney transplant, male relatives "came less often" to reduce her domestic burden. While she interprets this as benevolent consideration, it highlights a lack of functional reciprocity; their care was expressed through absence rather than by performing familial labour themselves. The lack of active support from her male kin,

coupled with her husband's affair, demonstrates how the relational health her labour sought to sustain was often fractured by those who benefited most from it. When acts of care become unilateral, *Ren* can be pulled into a gendered duty that is not met with functional reciprocity. Under those conditions, what is framed as virtue risks becoming the kind of systemic exploitation Rosenlee (2024) critiques. Hua's story thus occupies a precarious tension. She achieves sophisticated ethical agency and relational joy, yet the sustainability of her *Ren* is threatened by a lack of "staggered flourishing" (Rosenlee, 2024) or reciprocity from the men she supports.

7.2 Qiao's Collaborative Compassion

Building on Hua's foundational link between family and virtue, Qiao's account of *Ren* centres on compassion as something learned less through formal instruction than through everyday family practice. Qiao does not describe this memory as an intense moral awakening at the time. Instead, the significance of the event lies in how an ordinary scene of giving, narrated as simple "kind-heartedness", later becomes legible as an ethical orientation:

Qiao: When I was young, there were quite a lot of beggars at that time. At that time, I remember once, a beggar came asking for rice. Yes. At that time, food was still very scarce... Then my father took a bowl and filled it with rice for the person. And then my mother said something, because we had many children in our family. There were seven people in our family, five children. Wow, five children. Yes, yes, so food was still very tight, we relied on just the two of them, relied on my parents' labour to have... I remember that bowl was a big bowl, hahaha.

Interviewer: How did you feel at that time? Were you angry?

Qiao: I didn't feel anything. At that time, I don't know, I was still young then.

Interviewer: How did the homeless person respond to him?

Qiao: That person must have been extremely grateful... At that time I didn't have many thoughts, it seemed like it wasn't a big deal, because my parents were just very kind-hearted.

Qiao's repeated emphasis that it "wasn't a big deal" is analytically important. It suggests that generosity under scarcity was normalised within the family's moral world, rather than framed

as exceptional sacrifice. In this sense, what is being transmitted is not a discrete “lesson” with a clear emotional imprint, but a taken-for-granted sense of what kind-hearted people do.

At the same time, a care-ethics reading can complicate this scene. Through Tronto’s (2013) lens, the father’s unilateral decision to give a large bowl of rice can be read as a form of charity enacted without explicit negotiation of shared household constraints. The “privilege” at stake here is not material abundance, but decision-making authority within the family at a moment of scarcity. This is a structurally gendered and generational dynamic that can coexist with genuine humane intent.

Tronto (2013) A more collaborative orientation, resonant with Rosenlee’s (2006, 2024) emphasis on relational personhood, would not require performing consultation in front of a hungry person requesting food. Instead, collaboration can be understood as an ongoing family practice: a shared norm about what can be offered to others in need, and a reflective conversation afterwards that invites children into ethical participation and mutual accountability. In this framing, the family cultivates *Ren* together, and the process also models respect for those who share the burdens and consequences of giving. This emphasis on co-ordinated, reflective support aligns with research on allyship, which treats care as an ongoing, relational practice rather than a single benevolent gesture (Li, Hung, & Hodgetts, 2020).

Nevertheless, the power of this moment in Qiao’s narrative lies in how the act becomes part of the family’s ordinary “social grammar”. What appears as spontaneous compassion is narrated as routine kind-heartedness, and through repetition and normalisation it becomes woven into *Li* as a sense of proper conduct in daily life (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Blue, 2019; Rosenlee, 2024). Put differently, the scene illustrates how *Ren* can be absorbed through modelling, trust, and everyday narration rather than intellectual study (Laible et al., 2019; Rosenlee, 2024; Wang, 2017).

This transmission of virtue is facilitated by Qiao’s practice of *Xiao*, understood here as a child’s receptiveness rooted in trust and care (Rosenlee, 2024), and consistent with scholarship on moral cultivation in contemporary Chinese families (Wang, 2017). Within this relational context, compassionate action can become a default ethical response, shaping later instincts about what matters and what counts as decent conduct. In this way, Qiao’s narrative reveals *Ren* as both a deeply rooted inheritance and a concept that can be thoughtfully refined

(Rosenlee, 2024). A Confucian feminist reinterpretation does not deny the goodness of giving. It asks how compassionate practices can be sustained without reproducing unilateral, hierarchical patterns, and how humane action can be rearticulated as a shared, collaborative ethic of care built on partnership rather than solitary moral authority (Rosenlee, 2024).

7.3 Wan's Practice of Irreplaceable Companionship

Wan grounds her reinterpretation of *Ren* in both practical acts of taking the time to be with and support family members and affective resonance of shared presence. Her narrative reveals an understanding of *Ren* as an ethic of irreplaceable, affective companionship whereby the goal is creating relational meaning rather than simply performing tasks of care and support. This is evidenced by her experience of providing care during her father's long illness, after he was paralysed by a stroke:

...It should be about 20, almost 30 years ago... at that time, my sisters and brothers... were all very busy with work, and I... to put it bluntly, I was perhaps a bit lazier... I didn't have a job after getting married and having my son... I had more time, plus my husband was also very good to my parents. So, whenever my father was hospitalised, it was always me who went home to take care of them...

A feminist critique would likely focus on her self-deprecating justification: "I was a bit lazier". This phrasing highlights how unpaid care labour is culturally devalued to the extent that women may frame their availability for familial care as "laziness" compared to formal employment. However, the heart of Wan's story can also be read as offering a counter-narrative that reveals the profound value within this labour. Her care was not merely practical; it was a deeply felt, irreplaceable companionship. Even when her mother was capable of providing physical support, her father specifically longed for Wan's presence, highlighting an emotional need that transcended simple task-oriented care:

My father was sick for about 10-20 years... My mother would say, "You all have your own families. You don't need to keep coming back." But whenever he was hospitalized, my father would say, "Go call my second daughter to come back." My mother would say, "Hey, you're in the hospital and I'm perfectly capable of taking

care of you, aren't I?" The next day if I hadn't gone yet, he would ask, "Why hasn't she come back yet?" My mother had no choice but to call me, "Come back, your father wants to see you," so I had to go back.

Interviewer: I think this kind of care isn't something a stranger can provide. I feel that the care children give to their parents cannot be replaced by anyone else, no matter how capable they are.

The dialogue reveals a co-constructed recognition that some forms of care are non-fungible. When the interviewer suggests that this care cannot be replaced by a stranger, Wan agrees:

It's different... it's very joyful. Every time I went back, he was extremely happy, very joyful. When I go back to see him, oh, he would smile every day. My mother would say, "Look how happy your father is when you come back."

This exchange reveals the core of Wan's ethic of *Ren*, where her presence is valued for connection rather than task completion. The joy Wan describes is not a denial of the father's suffering, but the moral satisfaction of "being-with" (Rosenlee, 2024). Her care is uniquely different because it is rooted in a specific parent-child bond. The interaction between Wan and her mother further illustrates a negotiation of care, as her mother attempts to shield Wan from full responsibility by reminding her of the responsibilities she holds toward her nuclear family.

From Rosenlee's (2024) perspective, this can be read as representing a profound claim for the value of loving relationships over replaceable service. It affirms Rosenlee's (2024) emphasis on the relational self, wherein moral worth is constituted through unique bonds and social interactions. This cultivation of inner harmony extends beyond the family, as seen in Wan's care for her classmate's dying father:

I used to have a classmate whose father had the same illness as my father, and when I would go home, I would visit him... After my father passed away, well, I felt like he was like a father to me too, so sometimes I would go back to visit him, buy him some things, talk with him, chat a bit. He would cry when he saw me...

This narrative illustrates Rosenlee's (2024) argument that *Xiao* is the root from which *Ren* grows. Wan's care to the second man is an extension of filial devotion grounded in a shared

community history. Most profoundly, her story highlights *Ren* as an act of compassionate presence. Her visits were not social obligations. Wan became a steadfast witness to this man's suffering, showing the emotional courage to remain present with a dying man simply to offer the comfort of conversation.

This profound commitment to the other is underpinned by a surprisingly simple, self-validating moral logic; her justification is not based on external praise, but on a personal moral standard and the intuitive feeling of reassurance that follows an act of care:

I think it's just a very ordinary thing. I don't really think much of it, I just feel that he is my classmate's father, and he's also from our parents' generation, so I feel I should visit him, I don't have any special thoughts about it. I just feel reassured after I visit him, I just feel good after seeing him.

From a Rosenlee (2024) inspired perspective, this reassurance is the internal reward of a self-cultivated person, a sense of moral harmony achieved by acting in alignment with deep, lived values. For Wan, *Ren* is not a calculated public duty but a deeply personal ethic of irreplaceable emotional companionship. Ultimately, Wan reclaims the feminine domain of emotional care as a primary virtue. She demonstrates that benevolent care is a relational enactment of self that forges profound meaning by affirming unique human bonds. In this view, the most profound form of *Ren* is creating a relational world wherein one's very presence can comprise a source of healing joy.

7.4 Gang's Fierce, Protective Justice

As the final participant account in this *Ren* chapter, this section turns to Gang, whose account rearticulates *Ren* as a form of fierce, protective justice. Her narrative challenges the common assumption that righteous *Ren* is an exclusively male virtue associated with public life. In Confucian terms, this pairing is often described as *Ren-yi* (humaneness and righteousness).

Gang's journey to a sophisticated ethic begins with a surprisingly traditional starting point. Unlike other participants, she draws a sharp distinction between the ethical rules governing family life and those governing relationships outside the family: "We don't talk about righteousness in the family."

This statement suggests that Gang treats the family not as a domain where righteousness is explicitly named, but as a private space where moral action is assumed. In her framing, family care is enacted as taken-for-granted affection. By contrast, *Ren-yi* belongs to relationships where trust must be negotiated. For Gang, this explicit code is practised outside the family to build integrity and trust within negotiated affiliations (Yuan et al., 2023). In contrast, the family is perceived as a realm of assumed love, distinct from the negotiated ethics of honour governing the public realm. Bringing this language of principled reciprocity into the family feels inappropriately cold to her, and implies that kinship bonds are conditional rather than absolute (Yuan et al., 2023).

Although this distinction is socially intelligible, it risks leaving gendered care obligations uninterrogated (Hochschild, 1989; Fraser, 2016). Gang's idealisation of the family as an intimate private space beyond explicit justice carries a profound risk. When care obligations are treated as beyond negotiation, unequal burdens can become normalised and therefore invisible. In this sense, exempting the domestic sphere from explicit justice-talk risks creating a private realm in which unequal care burdens are normalised and rendered less open to critique (Hochschild, 1989; England & Folbre, 1999). In such conditions, the unequal burdens of care disproportionately shouldered by women can become framed as a natural and necessary form of sacrifice, taken for granted and not questioned. Instead, this labour can be naturalised as an expected part of a woman's familial role, enacted out of duty rather than recognised as a contribution that warrants reciprocal justice (Rosenlee, 2024).

Having drawn this boundary between family and 'justice-talk', Gang then refines her claim by specifying that *Ren-yi* applies primarily to friends and colleagues, especially in moments when there is a dispute to navigate or an accusation to address. Notably, although the second question shifted from family to strangers, Gang repeated virtually the same wording:

No, Humaneness/Benevolence-Righteousness is for friends, colleagues, when you encounter situations between them, that's when you need to talk about Humaneness/Benevolence-Righteousness.

Taken together, her account implies not just a simple public-private divide, but three practical domains. First, the familial domain operates on intuitive care. Second, her immediate social network is governed by the explicit practice of *Ren-yi* as a form of integrity-based social credit (Yuan et al., 2023). Here, her emphasis on "encountering

problems” suggests she treats *Ren-yi* as something invoked for moments of dispute, accusation, or decision, rather than as a constant state of being. Finally, the domain of strangers sits at the edge of her ethical purview and appears to be of lesser concern.

Whilst Gang’s stated understanding of *Ren-yi* is compartmentalised, her lived narrative suggests that these boundaries are more porous than she admits when speaking in abstractions. Gang’s defence of a friend demonstrates that her social ethic is just as meaningful as any familial duty. This account begins with an act of pragmatic care: she defended a friend from accusations of theft and then helped them find alternative employment:

Someone’s belongings were stolen, and the host said it was the person I brought [the friend with a disability] who stole them. I insisted they⁶ wouldn’t do such a thing and vouched for them completely... My friend and their sister said I showed great loyalty... It was proven they weren’t the thief.

When asked how this act of righteousness made her feel about herself, Gang’s response was strikingly modest. Even when I suggested during the interview that such an act is a significant upholding of righteousness, Gang maintained that she had “no particular feelings” about it, stating simply that it was “normal” because one “cannot wrongfully accuse” others of theft.

From a Rosenlee-inspired (2024) perspective, this account represents an act of reclamation. Gang’s fierce loyalty is not merely a situational “crisis tool,” even if she sometimes describes it that way. It is grounded in an affective connection that carries a similar moral quality to that of kinship. While the degree of obligation may differ from that owed to a family member, the source of her agency remains grounded in an ongoing responsiveness to the needs of her affective ties (Rosenlee, 2024). As such, Gang’s assessment that this act felt “normal” suggests an embodied virtue. Her fusion of compassion and righteousness appears to have been internalised through self-cultivation.

However, the most consequential point is that Gang’s lived practice does not neatly conform to the boundaries she draws in abstraction. This integrated practice provides a powerful argument against her own stated rule. It suggests that the relational insight she offers a friend

⁶ They/them” is used here to maintain the participant’s original phrasing and protect the anonymity of the individual involved.

is also the very tool needed within the home to prevent domestic care from becoming taken for granted. By bringing this justice-oriented *Ren* back into the family, the domestic sphere is no longer presented as an exempt space wherein burdens are naturalised. Instead, it becomes a site wherein the same fierce loyalty used to defend a friend is used to negotiate and protect the flourishing of the caregiver. Gang's practice thus moves beyond the passive endurance often associated with sacrifice, offering a rearticulation of *Ren* that is both tender in its manifestations of care and rigorous in its requirement for justice.

Ultimately, Gang's lived experience speaks to how her personal ethic comprises more than a rigid code, and manifests as a fluid and responsive practice of care towards others. Her story suggests that a powerful *Ren* can be practised in any relationship through which empathy and connection are present. This understanding opens the possibility that this ethic can be extended even to strangers, once we recognise that we are all connected in a vast social web and hold a shared responsibility for one another's wellbeing.

7.5 Chapter Discussion

To appreciate the participants' rearticulations of *Ren*, it is useful to revisit their shared starting point: many initially treat *Ren* as a *named virtue* associated with public masculinity, rather than as an ethic anchored in domestic life. Hua and Wan express immediate unfamiliarity with enactments of *Ren* in public life. Wan explains that she perceived nothing regarding this concept at her work unit or within her home. Qiao further illustrates this gap by associating *Ren-yi* (Humaneness–righteousness) with the masculine loyalty of popular gangster films. This suggests that, for many, the popular lay understanding of *Ren* remains heavily gendered, anchored more in cinematic “brotherhood” than in an everyday relational ethic. Gang makes this separation explicit, stating that while *Ren* applies to friends and colleagues, family members “do not talk about humaneness.”

Yet these accounts also complicate this initial boundary between the public discourse of *Ren* and the private world of care. Although participants may not use the formal label within the home, their narratives of providing “irreplaceable companionship” describe a grassroots practice of humaneness. By prioritising presence and emotional connection over mere duty,

they enact the ethical substance of *Ren* through the very relational care they initially categorised as separate from the concept.

My analysis of overlapping yet divergent paths in participant narratives shows how lived experience can forge multiple rearticulations of *Ren*, reclaiming it as a dynamic, relational ethic applicable to participants' everyday lives. Across the four narratives, *Ren* is reworked from a male-coded public ideal into a shared commitment to humane action. This is evident in Hua's infrastructural work of community-building, Qiao's collaborative wellbeing, Wan's affective companionship, and Gang's protective justice. Together, these complementary articulations demonstrate that *Ren* comprises more than a static virtue. Rather, it emerges as a multifaceted living ethic cultivated through emotional and relational experience.

This reinterpretation also clarifies where *Ren* takes root and how it becomes sustainable. In these accounts, the family remains a central site where care obligations are culturally organised and moral sensibilities are repeatedly tested. Following Rosenlee's framing of *Xiao* (Filial Piety) as the root of *Ren*, participants' reworkings suggest that humaneness can be anchored in a reinterpreted *Xiao* understood as reciprocal, caring responsibility. This brings the practice of humaneness firmly into the home and challenges a traditional separation of ethical spheres.

In this context, *Ren* is not reduced to a public performance for social approval or "face," even though social recognition can still matter. Participant accounts instead suggest a shift in moral gravity toward a desire to protect others that stems from an understanding of human interdependency. *Ren* is presented as a collaborative ethic, enacted not through top-down commands or the unilateral sacrifice critiqued in earlier theoretical discussions, but through compassion that can create relational joy. This affective warmth provides a moral energy often missing from abstract rationalist definitions, supporting its own sustainability.

As *Ren* is re-anchored in reciprocal care, it also reshapes what participants treat as "appropriate" conduct in everyday relations. Consequently, this *Ren* provides the moral foundation for a renewed *Li*: a flexible, humane, and just set of social practices needed to build truly harmonious communities.

Chapter 8: Li 禮 (Propriety/Ritual) - From Patriarchal Rules to Women' s Relational Wisdom

This chapter explores *Li*, a Confucian approach to social order. It examines the tension between patriarchal interpretations of *Li* as fixed rules and a Confucian feminist reinterpretation that reclaims *Li* as flexible, relational practical wisdom. Through the lived experiences of the four research participants, I trace how *Li* is challenged, reclaimed, and transformed from a rigid external code into a multifaceted ethical practice.

My analysis follows four divergent yet compatible paths, revealing *Li* through Qiao's domestic pedagogy of independence; Hua's pragmatic social innovation; Gang's dynamic process of self-correction; and Wan's negotiated practice of shared accountability. Drawing on Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, I argue that when this "social grammar" (*Li*) is guided by the core virtue of *Ren*, it becomes a tool for both moral self-cultivation and the revision of social rules toward a more just and harmonious world.

8.1 Qiao's Domestic Pedagogy of Independence

Qiao's accounts suggest that her practice of *Li* is oriented toward shaping everyday domestic relations, especially through what she chooses to preserve, what she refuses, and what she attempts to pass on to her children. I begin the *Li* chapter with Qiao because her narrative most clearly foregrounds the domestic sphere as a primary site where propriety is negotiated, revised, and transmitted across generations. In this section, I treat *Li* as a practical social grammar: the everyday proprieties, expectations, and routines through which gendered relationships are enacted and contested in family life. Read in this way, Qiao's domestic work becomes a form of quiet world-building with intergenerational intent.

Qiao's approach to *Li* is first visible in her direct and historically informed rejection of its most oppressive patriarchal forms. When presented with the *Three Obediences*, she dismisses these as an unworkable trap for modern women. Qiao also grounds her position in the historical reality of the economic shifts of the Deng era and Mao's declarations of gender equality (Cook & Dong, 2011):

If we followed everything exactly like that, then we women would have no way out... Yes, yes. Society probably wouldn't have developed so well [without women participating in paid employment] ... Women are actually very capable, isn't there a saying that "women hold up half the sky"?

In wielding this state-authored phrase, Qiao reveals a worldview that defines women's worth in collective terms. For her, the slogan is not just a claim for empowerment; it is the ultimate justification for equality, measuring success by its contribution to the flourishing of Chinese society. Qiao suggests that contemporary success depends fundamentally on the female economic agency that traditional *Li* once sought to constrain, making women's empowerment through paid employment a public good, not just a private victory.

Qiao's narrative also reveals a hierarchy of social influence as she understands it. While she celebrates the collective power of working women, she positions herself as lacking the authority to change "social rules" because she has not worked outside the home:

I probably don't have any, because I've never really worked outside the home.

This extract suggests a sharp distinction between the public sphere of formal employment and the private world of the home. In Qiao's view, authority over "social rules" belongs to those with recognised socioeconomic standing. This moment highlights the ongoing challenge of reclaiming the immense labour of the domestic sphere as a source of public voice (Sun et al., 2015). While this domestic invisibility being contested, it remains a site of complex and unresolved authority (Zhang & Coene, 2024).

At the same time, Qiao does not describe herself as passive within the household. When she turns to the rules and rhythms of family life, her stance shifts from hesitation to practical confidence. Her account suggests a distinction between patriarchal prescriptions to be refused and relational proprieties of respect to be cultivated. In this space, Qiao views herself as a cultural transmitter focused on preservation rather than a strict rule-maker:

I don't really set many rules, I just want to pass down the etiquette, the manners that we learned when we were young to the children.

Qiao's contribution to cultural reproduction is presented as a careful, pragmatic process of adaptation, rather than a radical break from the past. By choosing which traditions to keep

and which to discard, Qiao performs a cultural re-articulation (Hall, 1986); she modifies the underlying rhythms of her household (Blue, 2019) to reconstruct their position within the present social order.

When discussing her decision to leave a successful career to raise children, Qiao frames Li as a rational response to the powerful social scripts and economic realities of her era:

...Once a woman gets married and doesn't work, right? There were so many women who didn't work... Like in the past, wasn't it about getting married, having children, taking care of kids, just that. Isn't that right? And when needed [financially], you certainly couldn't ask the man to step down from his job, could you?

Qiao grounds this script in the historical economic hegemony of the male breadwinner, explaining that it was unthinkable to ask a man to leave his post for familial care needs. This analysis demonstrates her agency as a thinker who can critically reassess systemic constraints on women's life choices. Within this story, Qiao does not emerge as a passive victim of tradition, she is self-characterized as a social agent who made pragmatic decisions within the patriarchal social order of her time as a young mother. Such reflections on systemic constraints historically faced by women also shapes Qiao's vision for her daughter's future. When asked about her expectations, Qiao's response reveals a consciously evolving perspective:

For her, I would still prefer that she works...[because] Mindsets have changed.

Here, Qiao demonstrates a core insight from Confucian feminism: the notion of an evolving *Li* (Rosenlee, 2024). Qiao understands that social scripts and gender relations are not timeless, pragmatically adapting her values to an evolving social order, rather than insisting her daughter follow the path of Qiao's generation (Sun & Chen, 2015).

However, Qiao's emphasis is less on prescribing a particular life and more on equipping her daughter with independence and a practical social grammar for navigating the structural constraints women face in the present social order. This adaptive approach represents a powerful, non-confrontational form of feminist progress enacted through intergenerational hope. By aligning her daughter's future with the acquisition of professional opportunities, Qiao expresses her support for the next generation to exercise more agency than was

available to Qiao's generation. This transforms the domestic space into a site of strategic preparation, where the cultivation of the daughter's independence becomes a shared family project rather than an individualistic rebellion against the system.

This intergenerational project is underpinned by Qiao's own domestic reality; her negotiation of personal autonomy is strengthened by a supportive partnership with her husband, revealing how practical relationship dynamics can form the foundation of her feminist practice. When reflecting on the balance between her personal interests and family duties, Qiao recounts skilfully navigating household rules through indirect communication:

Qiao: ... *I should say my husband is quite supportive of me. If he believed that as a woman, I must first take care of everything at home before doing things elsewhere, then I probably wouldn't have been able to accomplish what I have.*

Interviewer: *Why do you say that?*

Qiao: *You definitely need someone to support you, because sometimes, you know, there are only so many hours in a day, and you can't possibly do everything perfectly... Sometimes, you see, when I get busy, I certainly can't manage everything at home, so my husband takes care of things himself.*

A critical feminist analysis of this domestic balance might foreground the contingent nature of Qiao's agency. From this perspective, her autonomy appears less as a structural right and more as a privately negotiated possibility that depends on her husband's willingness to "support" her. Qiao's account also indicates that, even in a supportive partnership, the default allocation of responsibility remains gendered (Chen, 2024). Her husband is framed as someone who steps in when she is busy, rather than as an equal co-manager of the domestic sphere, which implies that domestic responsibility is assumed to be hers in the first place. One might also read this household arrangement as a form of functional pragmatism, where responsibilities are divided for efficiency, with Qiao's husband prioritising paid work and Qiao managing domestic labour. Yet such a pragmatic reading needs to be situated within a specific social and historical order, because what appears as "efficiency" often reproduces gendered defaults in unpaid work (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Hook, 2010). In Qiao's reality, these negotiations unfold under the hegemony of the male breadwinner and structural limits on women's earning power (Leung, 2003; Qin et al., 2016). They also unfold alongside persistent expectations that women remain the primary responders to domestic contingencies, such as caring for sick children (Li, 2017; Chen, 2024).

At the same time, Qiao's narrative points to a pragmatic renegotiation of domestic propriety within the constraints of a male-breadwinner social order (Leung, 2003) and structural limits on women's earning power (Qin et al., 2016). In this context, her practice of *Li* is expressed through how she cultivates flexibility, reciprocity, and everyday accommodation as the moral basis of a modern partnership. As Qiao articulated, the essence of a modern union lies in complementarity: Click or tap here to enter text.

Qiao: *I think it's about complementing each other.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean?*

Qiao: *It should be, you see, I think in a marriage, people should complement each other, then be mutually accommodating, and mutually considerate.*

Interviewer: *Oh, so it's not about what a woman should do, and then, but rather about what my partner needs right now, and how I can help them. Right. It's not about using gender to regulate how things should be done.*

Qiao: *Exactly... I think in a marriage, if you still emphasise those old-fashioned ideas, then women will definitely be in a disadvantaged position, right? Then you'd just be compromising all the time. Hmm. I think most women nowadays probably wouldn't be able to tolerate that*

In this interview extract, Qiao rejects the traditional application of *Li* where a rigid gendered division of labour served as the social grammar. Instead, she advocates for a fluid domestic structure determined by situational need. This vision of partnership is built on the compassionate ethic of *Ren*, not on rigid hierarchy of mandated expectations. This redefinition stems from Qiao's critical assessment of how traditional marriage disadvantaged women through "unilateral compromise." Her declaration that modern women are "unable to tolerate this" marks a clear feminist consciousness and suggests changes in gender relations over time in the social order. From a Confucian feminist perspective, Qiao is doing more than critiquing the past; she is actively co-creating a new, more equitable *Li*. She replaces the old hierarchy with a flexible practice centred on reciprocity and collaborative problem solving. This propriety is designed not to enforce power, but to foster a relationship in which neither partner is disadvantaged, creating the conditions for a genuine and lasting *He* (harmony).

Even as Qiao works to create this equitable partnership, she expresses concern about broader social trends, noting that men today often lack the sense of responsibility held by their predecessors:

I feel like people nowadays, I feel like even from watching TV, men don't seem to have as much sense of responsibility.

Qiao's observation echoes the paradox whereby men may benefit from women's economic participation while women experience diminished wellbeing due to the unequal weight of domestic care responsibilities (Chen & Zhang, 2024). Faced with this, Qiao uses her maternal role as a site of feminist world-building:

Oh, I educate my son. With my son I definitely have him do everything, and then my son gets dissatisfied, being asked to do everything... Of course I hope boys will have a sense of responsibility... I also ask my daughter to do things. I treat them the same...

This moment also clarifies how Qiao understands influence. Although she does not claim authority to reshape society-wide rules, she treats the household as a legitimate site for cultivating responsibility in the next generation. By requiring her son to participate in domestic labour, she is not simply assigning chores. She is working to normalise care as a shared responsibility, and to cultivate a masculinity oriented toward familial accountability.

Read through Rosenlee's (2024) emphasis on moral cultivation and shared ethical labour, Qiao's parenting practice can be interpreted as an effort to redistribute the moral and practical work of care across genders. In this sense, the domestic sphere becomes a site of preparation, where everyday routines are used to widen the conditions of possibility for more equitable partnerships in the next generation.

8.2 Hua's Pragmatic Social Innovation

While Qiao focuses on the pedagogical life of her family, Hua extends similar wisdom into her broader social circle. Hua emphasises the practice of *Li* through the careful crafting of sustainable social arrangements, demonstrating how a flexible approach can shape collective experiences beyond the domestic sphere.

Hua's practice is illustrated when navigating complex social dynamics. In response to the observation that some younger people adopt an individualistic, "don't bother me" attitude,

Hua demonstrates the necessity of active social labour. She alludes to the meticulous work involved in organising group outings:

We need to consider who doesn't get along with whom... you have to think about which people to invite? ... Even if it means making multiple trips. Usually, it's just Wan and me who go check out places first... When you have many people, if you haven't scouted the location first, then eating there or enjoying activities becomes a problem.

Hua's planning represents the necessary social labour that prevents group discord. While her meticulous approach may not be universally replicable, as not every individual possesses the time or opportunity to execute such arrangements, her actions reveal a key ethical distinction. The problem is not *Li* itself, but *Li* when it is not guided by a *Ren* that considers diverse needs. Her considered actions embody a compassionate, responsive *Li*, showing that a thriving community is built not on mutual indifference, but on the constant and caring practice of relational coordination.

This capacity for relational care is also anchored by Hua in a pragmatic, material foundation of economic self-reliance. For Hua, the ability to maintain these sophisticated social arrangements, and to refuse unfair relational terms, often depends on a woman's own standing within the socioeconomic order. She grounds this perspective in her grandmother's pragmatic wisdom, using the metaphor for female agency:

...Don't have your palm facing up, have it facing down, earn your own money. Palm facing down means you're handling your own money, palm facing up means you're asking men for money... Why can women nowadays propose divorce? ... Because they are economically independent. This is a very important point.

In Hua's framing, "proper conduct" is not moralised obedience. Instead, it is the capacity to participate in relationships without coercive dependence. She identifies economic independence as a foundational element in a woman's power to negotiate her position or escape unjust relationships, especially in the current economic context. While Hua's focus on financial independence may oversimplify the motivations for divorce, it exposes a critical tension: economic empowerment expands women's exit options, yet domestic expectations

often remain unchanged. Under rigid gendered norms of *Li*, paid work can coexist with an unsustainable “double burden” for women:

... The man goes out to work, the woman also goes out to work, but when the woman returns home, she still has to cook, take care of the family, take care of the children, isn't that so? It's like a double burden. So why are women nowadays proposing divorce? They're refusing to do it... Why can't we jointly take care of the home when we return? Why should I do it alone? ... So, women nowadays are saying, I'd rather not get married...

This extract draws on public narratives regarding changing gender roles and responsibilities in the present social order. Hua's account supports the view that feminist progress towards greater equality encompasses the difficult work of creating a new *Li* built on reciprocal and collaborative gender relations. As noted in Chapter 6, Gang's family already operate on non-gendered domestic rules, such as “whoever comes home first, cooks.” Hua argues that this flexible, collaborative *Li* is precisely what is needed for modern relationships to be sustainable.

Rather than waiting for systemic change, Hua proposes a pragmatic approach that begins within the family through deliberate education and role-modelling. She argues that “smart women” are those who actively “teach” the men in their lives to share domestic responsibilities:

Our younger nephew... used to be like a lord, never doing anything. After he got married, his wife was formidable. She educated him... Once you've taught them, you are liberated, then everyone works together... Now, gradually, he's the one cooking at home... He specialises in cooking certain things, taking care of the children, he shares in all of that. Before, he didn't do anything, really nothing at all. I said, hey, marriage changes things.

Although the responsibility for transforming masculinity should not rest exclusively with women, Hua implies that if men are unlikely to initiate this change themselves, women must proactively identify opportune moments and workable strategies for change. This is less a normative endorsement than a situated tactic within constrained options, where household-level change is one of the few levers that feels immediately available. The “liberation” she

describes is not an individualistic freedom from the family. It is freedom from unilateral responsibility, found within collaborative, mutually supportive relations. This vision of a harmonious family is built on reciprocal *Ren* and an evolving *Li* (Rosenlee, 2024).

This approach is also rooted in a culturally specific understanding of moral development, locating *Xiao* as a foundation for respect and responsiveness in family life. Hua contrasts the success of an aunt whose sons help with housework with the cautionary tale of a niece who, by being too “capable” and doing everything herself, failed (in Hua’s view) to educate the men in her life:

Hua: *...when all three sons come home, they all help their mother with housework. Their mother can go out and play mahjong freely or hang out with friends easily.”*

Interviewer: *So it’s like, the mother gave birth to him, raised him, took care of him, and now he gives back to her.*

Hua: *Exactly.*

In this scenario, the mother’s earlier investment in her sons’ moral education results in her current freedom to rest, socialise, and pursue leisure. Hua also contrasts this scenario with a cautionary tale of a niece whose high level of capability proved counterproductive:

Because she’s capable, hardworking, and efficient... now her daughter-in-law has had a baby, her husband doesn’t know how to do things, her two sons don’t know how to do things, and she alone has to take care of the family; she can’t escape... If you raised your son properly, if he respects you and everything, then his wife wouldn’t dare treat you poorly.

These contrasting situations illustrate how early education shapes intergenerational harmony. While focusing primarily on individual “failings” risks oversimplifying the issue, Hua’s narrative reveals a significant structural reality: the consequences of failed moral cultivation can extend into relationships with in-laws, where respect and security are negotiated within family hierarchies. Here, Hua’s reasoning is explicitly strategic and hierarchy-aware. Respect is secured not only through affection but also through a son’s alignment within the family power structure. Hua links a mother’s pedagogical success to her own future security and standing within the family.

Hua also pointed to a broader social lag, where masculine roles have failed to adapt to the rapid development of modern, empowered women:

They just can't keep up. Nowadays women are really powerful.

Faced with this lagging shift in gender relations, Hua adopts a selective, grassroots pedagogical strategy: “to be able to teach one, is one.” From a Confucian feminist perspective, Hua’s strategy redefines *Li* as a pragmatic, justice-oriented practice. Her discernment that some men “cannot be taught” can be read as an expression of *Yi* (rightness), a form of contextual wisdom that protects moral resources from unsustainable demands. By choosing to be a competent teacher rather than withdrawing into resentment, Hua treats relationships as potential sites for mutual moral cultivation. This active approach embodies the practice of *Ren*, whereby one seeks to “establish others while establishing oneself.” Hua uses her agency to construct a shared social grammar that ethically guides men toward growth, laying the groundwork for a genuine, dynamic *He* achieved through shared responsibility.

This preference also demonstrates a practical recognition that systemic change is often slow and must navigate complex political and cultural values in China (Fu, 2017; Guo, 2013; Jue, 2019). In Hua’s account, structural constraints can force women into victimised positions. However, prolonged resignation can also narrow the space for negotiating shared responsibility within relationships (Bang et al., 2025).

In sum, Hua’s narrative frames *Li* as a living social practice that must be actively made and remade. Across community coordination, economic self-reliance, and selective pedagogy, she treats “proper conduct” as the work of sustaining relationships without surrendering justice. Through this pragmatic ethic, harmony is not assumed. It is cultivated through shared responsibility.

8.3 Gang’s Dynamic Process of Self-reflection

While Qiao and Hua focus on using *Li* to build community structures, Gang’s practice is oriented around courageous acts of balancing personal integrity with the pursuit of harmony. Put simply, Gang’s stance begins as a boundary claim (*Yi*), which she later learns to enact

through skilful relational practice (*Li*), in order to secure a form of harmony (*He*) that does not require self-erasure. This approach is best understood through the evolution of her own perspective; she explains:

Gang: *At my current age, I believe harmony is precious. But I wasn't like that when I was young... I was very assertive... It's not that I don't value harmony, harmony is harmony, but don't infringe on me.*

Interviewer: *So, you're saying we can have harmony, but I cannot tolerate, cannot endure humiliation.*

Gang: *Exactly.*

Drawing on Rosenlee's (2024) reconstructive Confucian feminist ethics, Gang's youthful assertiveness is not best understood as Western-style individualism, but as a form of *remonstrance*: a morally motivated challenge offered from within relationship to prevent harmony from becoming complicity (Rosenlee, 2024). Her firm condition, "harmony is harmony, but don't infringe on me", can be read as an ethical demand for *Yi* (Rightness) and a refusal of harmony that is sustained through gendered humiliation (Rosenlee, 2024). Rather than rejecting relationship, her refusal targets a particular moral configuration of the relationship, protecting it from becoming a vehicle for humiliation. In this sense, her insistence aims to uphold the moral integrity of the relational fabric itself.

Gang's journey also illustrates a process of moral cultivation: moving from defending boundaries to a more sophisticated understanding of how to actively cultivate harmony that remains compatible with dignity and fairness (Rosenlee, 2024). This integration of her past and present selves resembles a gradual process of refinement over time, as repeated social encounters shaped her sense of when to yield, when to insist, and how to do both without rupturing ties. Her current appreciation for *He* is not the passive conformity she once rejected, but a resilient achievement built upon mutual respect. Her practice of *Li* is revealed as the skilful art of creating a sustainable harmony aimed at mutual flourishing (Rosenlee, 2024).

The conversation then turned to the broader social rules governing women's lives. When asked whether society should change outdated rules disadvantageous to women, referencing the need for female economic participation, Gang's response was pragmatic: "Things are already changing now." However, when pressed on modern gender discrimination, such as

the reluctance of companies to hire women of childbearing age, she pivoted to what she saw as a more universal barrier:

Work at any time requires connections [Guanxi]. Without connections..., it's still very difficult.

Gang's assertion suggests that in her reality, official slogans and legal *Li* remain secondary to the systems operating beneath the surface. Her point is not only that networks exist, but that access to work is mediated through relationships, which means "rules" are enacted through discretionary human gatekeeping rather than applied neutrally. For Gang, the ultimate "law" of socioeconomic life is the practical reality of human social interrelatedness. While feminist scholarship has shown how *guanxi* networks have often been gendered and can reproduce patriarchal advantage (Zhang et al., 2020), Gang's narrative foregrounds how relational gatekeeping can also render formal equality hollow in practice.

This insight is not an argument against formal laws but a call to recognise their human foundation and partial impacts in terms of changing gender relations. Gang critiques the naive belief that a society governed by formal rules is inherently more just, reminding us that people administer these laws. Sociological research supports this view, showing how elite social networks and "social capital" shape the application of laws to maintain privilege (Pichler & Wallace, 2009). This aligns with Gang's observation that the power of legal *Li* is often superseded by the inherent human sociality and informal relationships of those wielding it. Consequently, a *Li* (policy) that is merely "fair at face value" remains insufficient, because it fails to address the power of this underlying social interrelatedness.

Taken together, Gang's account highlights a false binary: either rely on formal rules that are applied unevenly, or rely on informal ties that can be exclusionary. A more generative *Li* would make access less dependent on private networks by institutionalising humane relational support, transparent procedures, and accountable decision-making. Such a *Li* would actively cultivate humane connections (*Ren*) and equitable *He*, establishing a social foundation that is both just and relationally harmonious.

8.4 Wan's Negotiated Practice of Shared Accountability

My analysis now turns to Wan, who offers a socially conscious reinterpretation of *Li*, defining it not as mere etiquette but as a profound respect for the inherent dignity of all people. This perspective is grounded in her fundamental premise: *“I think respecting people is also a form of Li, right?”*

Wan illustrates this principle by criticising a common education-related motivational tactic in which parents use downward-mobility warnings to urge children to study, reflecting broader beliefs about schooling as a key pathway to future security and social mobility (Li et al., 2023; Ng & Wei, 2020):

I think you shouldn't tell your children “if you don't get educated, you'll end up like that.” That's very impolite and unfair to people. They're earning their living with their own abilities, they haven't done anything wrong, so why talk like that?

Here, Wan rejects the logic that academic anxiety justifies dehumanising comparisons, and instead frames respect for working people as an ethical demand of *Li*.

When I offered a pragmatic justification for this behaviour, suggesting parents might act out of a deep-seated anxiety, and might treat intense academic effort as the primary pathway for their children to achieve socioeconomic mobility, Wan rejected this logic entirely. For her, a “good” outcome cannot justify a morally flawed action:

They always say things like that, and I feel extremely uncomfortable... I just think this is very wrong. Sometimes when I see parents talking like this, I'll say something unpleasant; I look at them with contempt...

This reaction suggests that Wan's ethical convictions are visceral. She describes bodily discomfort and a “contemptuous gaze”, which can be read as indicating that moral judgement is experienced as embodied affect, not only as a cognitive stance.

Wan's emphasis on respect can be read as *Ren*-infused *Li*: she treats dignity as the ethical core of propriety, rather than as a surface politeness. In Wan's account, her intensity also points to a relational moral orientation, in which the wellbeing of one group cannot be secured through the humiliation of another. In this sense, Wan's account suggests one possible pathway by which cultivated familial ethics (*Xiao* understood as relational care and moral formation) can generalise beyond kin to vulnerable strangers.

To understand where this moral stance is coming from, it helps to return to Wan's family context. While Wan initially positions her family as a positive exception to traditions like the *Three Obediences*, she honestly admits that the patriarchal preference for sons was upheld by her own mother:

In our family, my mom was a bit like that... people in the past were all like that, thinking you must have a son. But my dad slightly favoured daughters... my dad was good to both... At that time we would also say to my mom, 'Look. Dad is so happy.' My mom would say, 'Yes, your dad is indeed good'.

Wan's narrative reveals that this humane practice, the father's prioritisation of *Ren* over the gendered hierarchies of traditional *Li*, was not merely a private preference. It became an explicitly affirmed family value, reinforced through the women's repeated, spoken recognition of his equitable care. For Wan, her father's clear affection for his daughters created a crucial buffer against wider patriarchal norms and facilitated happiness and harmony in the household. In Wan's narrative, this appears to have mitigated some of the harmful effects of rigid gendered familial preferences. Crucially, this practice of humane masculinity was reinforced through collective recognition, suggesting that *Li* can be reimagined when compassionate actions are named and treated as a standard for a happy, harmonious home.

This foundational understanding of a healthy family provides the lens through which Wan critiques broader social injustices. Wan's reasoning is holistic, beginning with the gap between the "gender equality" slogan and the reality of workplace discrimination:

It's said that there's gender equality. But in many ways, there is still inequality... When hiring women, they consider marriage, childbirth, nursing periods... in most cases there's still some bias, right?

Wan's critique then extends to consequences for the entire family system. She emphatically agrees that discriminatory rules can harm men by intensifying expectations that men should carry the full burden of economic provision. This family-centred perspective is the logical extension of her ethic of social interdependence: an injustice against one creates negative ripple effects for all.

I interpret Wan's emphasis on fathers' care and affection as carrying an implicit critique of a patriarchal masculinity defined largely by economic provision (Li, 2020, 2021). Here, I use 'humane masculinity' to mean a *Ren*-guided practice of fathering and partnership that treats caregiving as morally significant work, not as secondary to breadwinning. From perspective inspired Rosenlee-inspired (2024), Wan's account suggests that unjust social rules, or a *Li* that lacks *Ren*, cannot reliably produce family *He*. The core problem, in this reading, is a social order that appears to reward men who conform to a one-dimensional provider role. This incentive structure can be dehumanising to men themselves, because it reduces opportunities for moral cultivation through caregiving, or *Xiao*.

Wan's concern that provider-only expectations strain families aligns with empirical research on Chinese families showing that economic pressure on fathers is associated with parental distress and damaged parent–child relationships (Cui & Hong, 2021). This pressure can create significant internal conflict for urban fathers torn between societal expectations of breadwinning and their desire for emotional presence (Liu et al., 2025; Wang & Keizer, 2024). Relatedly, research is consistent with Wan's broader diagnosis of a systemic problem: a society that promotes economic dominance as the primary marker of male success (Ergen & Kohl, 2022). This narrow benchmark can force men into provider roles while setting a similarly restrictive economic standard for women's achievement (Lundberg & Stearns, 2019). One consequence is the devaluation of care labour, creating a relational deficit that can harm children, women, and men alike. Wan advocates for a new *Li* that encourages men to cultivate relational skills and joy. This is a vision of a more humane society in which everyone has opportunities to cultivate deep family bonds through *Xiao*, the essential foundation for achieving true *He*.

8.5 Chapter Discussion

The logic underpinning these four divergent yet complementary articulations of *Li* becomes clearer when analysing their shared starting point. Across the chapter, each participant offers a distinct articulation of *Li* (e.g., pragmatic unworkability, principled rebelliousness, family pride, and respect-based moral boundary-setting). Participants' collective rejection of oppressive, patriarchal *Li* reveals the common foundation from which their unique practices grow. This rejection is voiced most clearly when they are confronted with the *Three*

Obediences and Four Virtues. Their responses range from Qiao's pragmatic dismissal of the rules as unworkable for modern women, to Gang's principled rebellion based on her authentic character: "I don't have the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," because I think I'm very rebellious." Hua offers a rejection rooted in family pride, asserting her family has always operated on a more enlightened basis: "My family has never had the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues'." Wan reframes the entire discussion, arguing that any rule violating the foundational principle of respect is not a legitimate form of *Li*: "I think respecting people is also a form of *Li*, right?"

These responses signal how cultural principles are interpreted as dynamic and open to negotiation in everyday life (Hodgetts et al., 2020). For these participants, *Li* is not a sacred end in itself; it populates these women's lifeworlds as a flexible construct whose value is determined by its ability to sustain just and harmonious relationships. This shared act of reinterpretation reveals the women as discerning curators of their familial tradition who consistently reject rigid patriarchal forms whilst retaining what they describe as *Li*'s humane core: respect, mutual consideration, and relationship-sustaining conduct.

Across the preceding sections, I have interpreted each participant's critique as turning on a shared moral criterion: *Li* becomes empty or harmful when it is detached from *Ren*. For these participants, *Li* is only ethical when guided by the compassion, justice, and respect that constitute *Ren*. A striking pattern in their accounts is their focus on the domestic sphere. Participants do not suggest that a woman's place is only in the home. However, they do foreground the home as a primary site of care labour, where obligations, respect, and boundary-setting are most immediately tested. This is the work through which deep bonds are formed and relational skills are cultivated.

Ultimately, what unites these diverse practices is a single, powerful insight: achieving feminist goals does not require abandoning cultural heritage. Instead, their method re-centres *Li* on the core values of relational wellbeing and humane connection, or *Ren*. They demonstrate that a *Li* for gender equality must extend beyond mere "women's empowerment" to encompass the mutual cultivation of all members of society. In doing so, they demonstrate that everyday rules of interaction can be renegotiated, and that this process can begin in the conduct of everyday familial life, complementing (rather than relying solely on) top-down change from formal institutions.

This pursuit of a more just and harmonious world leads directly to the final core concept of this study. If *Li* provides a flexible social grammar for interaction, *He* names the ethical horizon that *Li* aims toward, while also providing a standard against which *Li* can be revised when it sustains injustice. The following chapter investigates this culminating virtue, exploring how the participants reject the patriarchal demand for passive conformity to forge a dynamic, negotiated, and resilient form of relational balance.

Chapter 9: *He* 和 (Harmony) – From Passive Conformity to a Dynamic Articulations of Relational Resilience

This chapter investigates the multifaceted Confucian ideal of *He*. Building on the analytical lens of the preceding chapters, I examine the tension between patriarchal interpretations of harmony and Confucian feminist reinterpretations of *He* (Rosenlee, 2024). In patriarchal accounts, *He* is often reduced to sameness, functioning as a mandate for unilateral compliance that asks women to “swallow bitterness” to maintain family order. By contrast, the lived experiences of the women in the Crafting Workshop suggest that genuine harmony is not the erasure of difference but a sophisticated, active achievement.

Through the narratives of Hua, Wan, Qiao, and Gang, I trace how *He* is challenged and reclaimed as a strategic contribution to relational resilience. Drawing on the theoretical lens established in Chapter 3, I read these narratives as different “articulations” of the same cultural value. As Hall (1986) argues, cultural elements have no fixed meaning; they are linked to specific practices within specific contexts. Consequently, each woman actively re-articulates *He* in relation to the texture of her life, linking it to pragmatism, negotiation, self-preservation, or self-reflection.

9.1 Hua’s Pragmatism: Constructing Sustainable Boundaries and Inner Liberation

Hua offers a pragmatic understanding of *He*, viewing it as an active achievement that must be engineered through shared, sustainable rules of community life. She endorses a modern view of harmony, not as a state of suppression, but as a dynamic process requiring the conscious creation of fair principles to prevent conflict. Hua illustrates this perspective with reference to the “AA system” (going Dutch), a practice Hua describes as uncommon among her peers. Hua explains that this is necessary because unequal financial contributions can lead to unspoken resentment, whereas sharing costs allows friendships to flourish:

Hua: This harmony is also about everyone hanging out together with mutual tolerance... like when we suggested going Dutch (AA)... it helps relationships last longer, because if you don't split the bill, today you treat, I treat, you spent 800, you

treated and spent 200, not everyone can handle this... some people feel uncomfortable inside.

Interviewer: *Right. So, you establish a rule that values harmony.*

Hua: *Yes. But people said, "Oh, going Dutch is so embarrassing." I said no, the two of us (with Wan) said we don't think so, we think going Dutch is good. It allows us to stay together longer.*

Interviewer: *I think you mean that we need to ensure no one feels wronged for harmony to exist.*

Hua: *Right.*

Here, Hua links harmony to preventing people from feeling "uncomfortable inside", rather than to avoiding disagreement. She presents *He* as a dynamic equilibrium for managing a plurality of financial capacities and social opinions. Crucially, she suggests that *He* is not synonymous with universal happiness; harmony is found in the fairness and sustainability of an arrangement, even when it requires people to sit with discomfort or embarrassment.

Hua's championing of this practice demonstrates her belief that *He* requires an evolving *Li*. For her, the AA system functions as a *Li* because it is a repeatable social rule that structures interaction. It is also a *Li* guided by *Ren*: a compassionate arrangement that considers friends' varied financial conditions to prevent social activities from becoming a burden. Her sophisticated understanding of *Li* is further revealed in the practical work required to maintain *He* within her social circle, a process involving complex social choreography:

Hua: *"My daughter always tells me, 'Mom, stop doing this... you're not the team leader'... But the issue is they feel like I'm being too explicit about everything."*

Interviewer: *But you already know the consequences of not doing this, you've anticipated them. You're helping everyone avoid the worst outcomes.*

Hua: *Yes.*

By being "too explicit," Hua is performing an act of anticipatory care. The efficacy of her strategy lies in how explicit rules address a recurring problem in her group: when expectations are left implicit, favours can become uneven and people silently keep score. Without a formal agreement, the expectation to help could curdle into a perceived obligation, weakening social ties. Hua's explicit rules protect the group's innate kindness from being exploited, ensuring any assistance offered is genuinely voluntary. This practice transforms

help from a burdensome obligation into a gift that strengthens the community. The result is a dynamic and resilient *He*. The result is not a harmony of silent conformity, but rather a negotiated achievement built on navigating “uncomfortable” but necessary communication. True *He* is achieved when practical *Li* is used to protect innate *Ren*, transforming difficult communication into a shared, ongoing practice of corrective care.

While Hua’s community leadership demonstrates her skill in navigating *He* in social contexts, her personal narrative reveals how the same pragmatic orientation operates in her intimate life. When she could not secure a fair external settlement, she pursued a different form of *He*: protecting her own moral and emotional continuity through inner realignment. Her path was forged in crisis; faced with her husband’s infidelity during a serious illness, her options were restricted by cultural customs and legal barriers. Her husband refused a divorce, citing what Hua described as a Chaoshan family standard⁷ in which family unity is treated as paramount and not easily dissolved (Li, 2023). Divorce can also carry social stigma in China, with concerns about “face” and family reputation discouraging marital dissolution even when intimate trust has collapsed (see, e.g., (Liao & Heaton, 1992). This institutional resistance was compounded by a legal system that often contests divorce petitions (Michelson, 2018).

Effectively trapped, Hua did not succumb to despair. Instead, she performed a strategic pivot: when she could not change her external reality, she transformed her internal perspective. This “spiritual liberation” allowed her to reclaim her own harmony through Buddhist notions of acceptance and self-transformation. This was not a cold application of theory, but a living practice of inner alignment:

Once you see this kind of situation, you have to think things through for yourself... staying healthy is what matters most... from then on, I just let all of that go... Although I cannot change others, I can change myself.

The resulting domestic arrangement functioned as what I call a “hollow uniformity”, meaning the household maintained the public form of family unity while intimate trust had collapsed and the affair was tolerated to preserve this facade. Although the husband’s refusal to divorce likely involved a complex blend of cultural pressure and personal motivation, the effect was

⁷ In accounts of Shantou/Chaoshan marriage customary law, the “family standard” frames the person as an extension of the family and treats family unity as a crucial social value that should not be easily dissolved (Li, 2023).

an imposition of sameness that Rosenlee's (2024) concept of *He* rejects. Recognising that social harmony was irrevocably broken, Hua nurtured a resilient inner *He* from the dissonances of betrayal, illness, and maternal love.

The complexity of this journey is revealed through a profound paradox: the person who betrayed Hua's trust was her husband's mistress and a close friend from her hometown who had moved to Shenzhen with her. Yet, this same woman saved Hua's life during a medical emergency:

Without her, I might not even be here anymore... I went to knock on her door since my husband was out... She carried me from the 7th floor down... she held the door of [a] car, refusing to let go... I always say if she had been a little more malicious...

In this crisis, established social roles receded, momentarily eclipsed by the urgency of suffering and survival. The mistress's actions did not erase the betrayal, but they introduced an irreducible moral complication grounded in shared humanity. Hua's ability to acknowledge this demonstrates that her inner *He* is not about simple forgiveness, but the capacity to hold two contradictory truths: this person caused immense pain, and this person is the reason she is alive.

Hua's *He* is a practical, life-affirming wisdom forged in a messy, inescapable web of interdependence. It finds balance not by erasing conflict, but by integrating life's most painful contradictions. This spiritual journey suggests that difficulties may be essential to truly cherishing harmony, serving as a catalyst for a realistic ethical wisdom. This stands in stark contrast to some Western individualistic paradigms that frame happiness as a personal achievement and can treat negative emotions as maladaptive and socially undesirable, creating pressure to avoid them (Dejonckheere et al., 2017). Hua's trajectory illustrates that *He* is not a static destination of personal happiness but a resilient and ongoing achievement requiring the continuous articulation of *Li* and *Ren* amidst life's inherent fragility. By transforming her internal perspective when external change was blocked, she demonstrates that a profound form of harmony can be cultivated even within the most contested and constrained relational landscapes.

9.2 Wan's Negotiation: Achieving Reciprocal Balance Through Mutual Understanding

While Hua's story illustrates the cultivation of *He* through personal crisis, Wan's story shows *He* in the everyday labour of relational repair. For Wan, *He* is cultivated as an inner steadiness achieved through empathy, self-reflection, and mutual communication, even when disagreement cannot be fully resolved (Rosenlee, 2024; Yang, 2018). The following conversation explores how harmony is actively negotiated through communication, apology, and mutual understanding in everyday interactions. I referenced a misunderstanding where Wan had apologised to Gang, the instructor. Wan took responsibility for her mistake while also noting that Gang's explanation had been unclear:

Wan: *"I have to say, it was me, but I also think she didn't explain clearly."*

Interviewer: *"Right... It's about mutual communication, right? How does this kind of harmony make you feel?"*

Wan: *"I think this way everyone can get along very well together... If it were as you said, wouldn't we end up arguing? That wouldn't be good, right?... On matters of principle, I would definitely stand my ground, right?"*

From Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminist perspective, Wan's approach embodies a nuanced practice of negotiation rather than conflict avoidance (Yang, 2018). She rejects a fragile peace by distinguishing between minor friction and matters of principle. By framing the misunderstanding as a shared breakdown in communication, she shifts the interaction away from one-sided blame and toward workable repair. This prioritises relational health over the individual need to be right, allowing for a shared resolution that preserves her dignity.

This strategy is rooted in an ethical wisdom that informs her modern practice of *Li*. Seen through Rosenlee's reconstructive lens, this is a modern practice of *Li* as relational 'grammar': apologising without self-erasure, and remonstrating about unclear instruction without escalating the conflict (Han & Cai, 2010; Rosenlee, 2024). Her apology is a key feminist act because it restores *He* without the self-effacement typically expected of women (Rosenlee, 2024; Yih, 2026). By acknowledging her error while also validating her own perspective, she shows that relational harmony can be achieved through a compassionate and empowering practical ethic.

Wan's account also suggests that *He* is not only negotiated in everyday frictions, but rebuilt after major rupture, through reciprocal family care. Faced with the profound loss of her husband, her understanding of *He* expanded beyond negotiating disagreements to restoring equilibrium through reciprocal care and filial devotion. Wan describes how her son stepped up to provide "strong support" during her bereavement:

When my husband passed away, I hadn't retired yet, and my son was working. I had never had a job and had never worked in Shenzhen. I thought to myself, 'You can't expect someone almost 50 years old to start working.' My son then told me, 'Don't worry, be strong, you've got me. Just do what you need to do, and I'll be here for you'... My son would often say, 'Don't worry, I'm here.'... you could say it's filial piety, or you could say it's caring for you.

From a liberal feminist lens that centres economic independence, this could be critiqued as reinforcing gendered dependency that leaves patriarchal structures intact (Chen et al., 2023). Wan's own assumption that it would be unrealistic to start work at nearly fifty could also be read as constraining her agency. However, Rosenlee (2024) offers an alternative reading where the central issue is relational wellbeing rather than individual status.

From a Rosenlee (2024) inspired perspective, the situation represents the fulfilment of reciprocal *Xiao* (Kyeong et al., 2025; Rosenlee, 2024).. Interdependency is viewed as an essential and natural part of the human condition (Kyeong et al., 2025). Wan cared for her son when he was dependent, and his support now is the ethical continuation of that life-sustaining bond. His actions represent a profound expression of *Ren* that restores family harmony.

This interpretation is supported by research defining filial piety as an "intrinsic desire" rooted in "familial solidarity," framing the son's actions as the purposeful fulfilment of a moral identity (Xiao et al., 2024). The new harmony that emerges is rooted in the life-sustaining power of *Ren* and *Xiao*. This care provides Wan with "very important inner strength" and illustrates Rosenlee's concept of a relational self, where inner peace is cultivated through the strength of core relationships. True *He* is found in the resilient balance that emerges when family members sustain each other through mutual, loving care.

9.3 Qiao's Self-Protection: The Discerning Strategy of Self-Preservation

While Wan's narrative demonstrates a *He* co-created through reciprocal care, Qiao's approach is more internally focused. When asked about managing conflict, her immediate response, "I think it's unnecessary", reflects a pragmatic ethical judgement. She chooses not to sustain emotional engagement with the conflict itself, contrasting with a confrontational mindset. Instead, she emphasises self-management:

I think if something truly happens, then just comfort yourself... You need to resolve things for yourself.

When questioned if letting a slight go invites exploitation, Qiao rejected this worry by emphasising self-reliance:

How could that happen? Right?...Then you just raise your vigilance. Guard against it, right?

This strategy preserves self-worth by reducing the internal cost of conflict. In Chinese interpersonal contexts, conflict avoidance and harmony-maintenance are commonly documented orientations, though they take multiple forms and motives (Huang, 2016; Leung et al., 2011). Such strategies are often selected in constrained situations where overt resistance is risky or costly, particularly when direct confrontation is perceived to carry high relationship costs (Leung et al., 2011; Zhang, 2011). At the same time, self-protective disengagement can shift the labour of managing harm onto the person who is harmed, and may unintentionally normalise quiet endurance rather than collective challenge. A Rosenlee (2024) lens helps clarify what is ethically at stake here: Qiao's choice can be read as pragmatic self-preservation, grounded in discernment about which conflicts are worth the emotional cost, without treating self-silencing as a moral ideal.

Qiao's primary goal is to protect her "inner peace" and avoid the feeling of being "blocked up in her heart." She recognises that prolonged anger is a self-inflicted wound:

Yes, if you get angry, you're only hurting yourself, aren't you? You can't make the other person feel your anger, can you?

Qiao's practice demonstrates that *He* is not a "winning" state secured through victory in every conflict; it is the wisdom of directing energy toward personal wellbeing. By refusing to

let conflicts consume her, she prioritises inner peace. Crucially, this is not an act of forgetting or passive avoidance; rather, it is a strategic retreat that preserves what she learned from the conflict and “raise her vigilance” for the future.

By guarding her heart while learning from the friction, she ensures she remains a capable participant in the relational system. This informed disengagement may help her avoid emotional depletion, leaving more capacity to build a future upon the lessons learned (Cui et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). It also creates space for collaboration, reducing the pull toward antagonism and power struggle.

9.4 Gang’s Reflection: The Dynamic Evolution from Control to Empathy

In this final participant account in the *He* chapter, I turn to Gang’s reflections on harmony as a practice shaped through everyday relational life. When asked to define *He*, Gang’s initial response was simple: “not arguing with people, getting along harmoniously.” At first glance, this emphasis on restraint sits uneasily with how Gang often communicates in practice. She frequently speaks up directly when something feels incorrect, which she readily confirmed. Gang illustrated how she navigates this gap through a recent incident involving shared materials:

I speak very quickly... when she took the gold thread, my reaction was fast, ‘Hey, that’s my thread’... But afterwards, I reflected on it. I realised I was a bit over the top... once something’s been brought out for everyone, why get so worked up? ...I should be more accommodating next time. After all, once something’s been brought out to share, I shouldn’t emphasise ownership anymore—that just makes people uncomfortable

Rather than treating this as a simple interpersonal “mistake,” I read Gang’s account as a small instance of moral self-work: she identifies an impulsive reaction, evaluates its relational effects, and articulates a future-oriented correction. From Rosenlee’s (2024) perspective, Gang’s path toward *He* exemplifies a process of self-cultivation in everyday life. Her habitual reaction is often immediate; however, her ethical practice emerges in post-facto reflection and deliberate self-correction. She moves from an emphasis on ownership to a commitment to shared ease, guided by a clear awareness that possessiveness “makes people

uncomfortable.” For Gang, *He* is not a natural state but a goal approached through the difficult work of correcting one’s own conduct.

This orientation is also visible in her domestic life. In describing household routines, Gang contrasted her past rigidity with her current flexibility:

When I was younger... I had to wash the dishes right after eating... if you didn’t go straight away... I’d just wash the dishes myself, clattering away noisily... But what about now? I can accept it. Anything.

Gang now frames “acceptance” as a practical foundation for *He*. She moves away from clattering passive-aggression toward a more sustainable understanding of shared labour. In her account, when the person who is more practiced in a task insists on rigid, immediate standards, others can become discouraged from participating because their efforts are anticipated as “not good enough” (Cao & Qian, 2024; Chen, 2024). Over time, this becomes a feedback loop: others withdraw to avoid critique, and the repeated act of taking over becomes the apparent proof that only one person can do the work properly (Cao & Qian, 2024).

For Gang, then, harmony is not achieved through a rigid 50/50 split of chores, which can fail to account for differences in speed, confidence, or skill. Instead, it requires both parties to participate in a relational adjustment. It requires the less confident to keep trying, and it also requires the more confident to intentionally create room for others to contribute, even when the results are slower or less polished. In this way, allowing a partner the room to practice care becomes more vital for long-term harmony than the immediate completion of a task. Harmony is transformed from a fragile state maintained by one person’s exhaustive effort into a shared achievement in which everyone has the agency to participate (Cao & Qian, 2024; Chen, 2024).

Gang located a deeper shift in this orientation in the aftermath of a 2017 car crash that hospitalised her for twenty days. Observing her husband and daughters rotate through exhausting hospital shifts, she began to recognise the toll her care took on them:

With them rotating like this, they were exhausted too... All they could do was take a shower, quickly throw their dirty clothes aside, right?... When I came home... I saw

that the bathroom had developed a yellow layer. But when I think back on it, I can't blame them... their time was already spent taking care of [me].

Her return home became a turning point. Faced with the messy bathroom, her initial impulse to correct the situation was overridden by a profound realisation: her family had prioritised her life over household standards. This shift toward an empathy-based *He* led to one of her most consequential insights: harmony must be a shared responsibility. Gang recognised that her habit of doing everything herself had inadvertently removed others' opportunities to develop their own capacities for care; as she noted, "once you do it, others don't need to do it anymore."

This is also where *He* becomes inseparable from *Li* as practical, everyday cultivation: harmony is sustained not by solitary control, but by shaping routines and expectations so that others can participate and grow. For Gang, *He* is an ethical achievement forged through two intertwined practices: ongoing self-correction through reflection, and the relational work of making space for others to contribute. Her account reframes harmony from a "harmony of control" into a "harmony of empathy," combining internal self-cultivation with the external practice of enabling others' agency within the family.

9.5 Chapter Discussion

Read together, the logic underpinning these four re-articulations of *He* becomes clearer when we attend to a common first move: refusing to equate harmony with submission to oppressive patriarchal mandates. When confronted with a traditional understanding that treats compliance as the route to peace, the women respond through subtle dismissal or direct assertions of agency. Qiao expresses gentle surprise that a suppressive model could be considered harmony, while Gang asserts her will: "If I want to listen, I'll listen. If I don't, I won't." Hua offers an uncomplicated "disagreement," and Wan questions the legitimacy of the rule itself: "Must you listen to... unreasonable demands? That's definitely not right." Once harmony is no longer defined as obedience, it becomes possible to treat *He* as something negotiated, practiced, and revised.

From this point, participant narratives shift away from seeking a static peace. Instead, they forge a “new *He*” as an active ethical practice rather than a state of universal happiness or the mere absence of conflict. This practice takes shape across four domains of everyday action. Hua crafts social rules to manage financial diversity. Wan repairs relationships through balanced apologies. Qiao protects inner steadiness through informed disengagement. Gang recalibrates habits through self-correction and an expanding domestic empathy. Taken together, these domains show that harmony is not anchored in one location. The work of *He* moves between protecting the self internally and mending bonds relationally.

Ultimately, this new *He* rejects self-erasure while retaining self-cultivation as an ethical demand. Across cases, what is refused is the expectation of silent endurance. What is retained is the idea that harmony requires ongoing work on the self and one’s conduct. The women refuse to passively absorb negative emotions or diminish themselves for the sake of the group. They also acknowledge that harmony can coexist with discomfort or embarrassment. Instead, they undertake the difficult work of revising habits and communication to produce a better collective outcome. Harmony is achieved not by erasing the self or avoiding friction, but by cultivating a wiser, more resilient self for the sustainable wellbeing of all.

With this final pillar in place, the qualitative examination of the four virtues is complete. The concluding chapter synthesises these insights to articulate the study’s broader theoretical contribution and the “Third Path” developed through this Confucian feminist reading.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this thesis I investigated how middle-aged Chinese women in Shenzhen navigate a gendered social order, family obligations, and relational complexities in efforts to promote harmony whilst contributing at the personal level to social changes in gender relations. I adopted a pragmatic constructionist approach to engage with the everyday experiences and practices of participants within a Party Masses Service Centre Crafting Workshop. This study explored how these women re-articulate traditional Confucian virtues to carve out autonomous zones for flourishing within their everyday lifeworlds.

To complete the thesis, this chapter is presented in six parts. First, I provide a synthesis of the key findings. Second, I outline the study's core theoretical implications. Third, I draw out methodological reflections for cross-cultural qualitative inquiry. Fourth, I set out a policy implication, arguing that gender equality requires a care settlement rather than women's labour participation alone. Fifth, I reflect on study limitations and engage in personal reflexivity regarding my first substantive research project. Finally, I close by considering my modest contribution from this research to Applied Social and Community Psychology.

10.1 Key Findings

This section synthesises my central claims about how middle-aged Chinese women in Shenzhen navigate gendered constraint through relational practices in a crafting workshop at the Party Masses Service Centre. I draw together three linked findings: (1) the workshop as a generative, restorative enclave of care; (2) participants' pragmatic re-articulation of *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* as revisable resources for dignity, reciprocity, and workable harmony; and (3) a Confucian feminist "Third Path" that becomes visible when these practices are read together, beyond a simple tradition versus autonomy binary. Overall, these findings show that gender transformation is not only pursued through individual independence or exit, but also through culturally grounded, everyday forms of relational agency that build both personal resilience and collective wellbeing (Rosenlee, 2024).

From my time in the workshop space and the recorded interviews, it appears that the workshop functions as a distinctive restorative space that extends beyond the common boundaries of a sporadic support group. While Western individual-focused approaches often emphasise the isolated self as the unit of change (Gergen, 2009), the workshop cultivates a relational path to mutual support and self-exploration. Within this enclave, women find a safe locale within which to discuss intimate concerns regarding marriage and family life, yet their restoration is not confined to talk alone. Participants gain a sense of belonging, strength, and renewed purpose through the active process of crafting together and helping others, whether by mentoring peers or contributing to the group's community charitable activities. These relational acts of service allow participants to cultivate a shared identity as workshop members who collectively constitute a community of practice (Li et al., 2009). In this study, participants' accounts suggest a shift from receiving care to actively creating and circulating care as an everyday cultural practice. This collective engagement suggests that personal flourishing is not only a solitary pursuit. It is also inextricably relational and fostered through the cultivation of community wellbeing (White & Jha, 2023; Atkinson, 2013).

Within this restorative enclave, participants also engage in practical concept-work, loosening inherited linkages between traditional virtues and patriarchal obedience, and re-weaving these virtues to serve contemporary relational needs and personal dignity. This suggests that gender transformation for middle-aged Chinese women does not require the rejection of Confucian cultural roots. Instead, it can involve creative and pragmatic revision that preserves cultural continuity while refusing gendered compliance. Read together, these practices illuminate a Confucian feminist "Third Path" that moves beyond the binary of patriarchal tradition and Western individualism.

This cultural re-articulation is rendered concrete through participants' pragmatic reworking of four core Confucian virtues. Participants reinterpret *Xiao* (Filial Piety) by separating care from gendered compliance, refusing the common coupling of filiality with submission. This revision aligns with Rosenlee's (2024) broader feminist project of reclamation, which distinguishes the ethical aims of Confucian virtues from their patriarchal historical content, thereby making revision possible without cultural rejection. In practice, women such as Wan and Gang make sense of filiality as the cultivation of relational joy and reciprocal attunement, allowing deep familial bonds to endure whilst also protecting personal dignity and growth.

Participants also reclaim *Ren* (Humaneness) as a universal, affective orientation enacted through everyday responsiveness, rather than an abstract or status-marked moral ideal. Rosenlee (2024) theorises *Ren* as a feminist-reclaimable ethical ground (rather than a virtue tethered to elite, male-coded public life). Participants in this research substantiate this reclamation by demonstrating how *Ren* becomes legible through ordinary practices of care, rather than through formal moral discourse of mandated responsibility alone. For example, Hua and Gang make sense of and perform *Ren* through sustained mutual support in the workshop, including practical mentoring, emotional holding, and collective problem-solving that strengthens the group's capacity to withstand isolation and competitive pressures.

Participants reinterpret *Li* (Propriety) not as a patriarchal rule-following practice, but rather as a revisable relational technique. They do so by storying practices of familial care that make expectations explicit and render care voluntary. Their stories speak to Rosenlee's (2024) account of *Li* as the concrete "social grammar" through which *Ren* becomes actionable, while also supporting her argument that *Li*'s gender-hierarchical content is historically contingent rather than essential. In the workshop and participants' everyday lives more generally, *Li* appears in norms of mutual teaching and non-confrontational coordination that prevent avoidable friction. For example, Hua's "AA system" distributes costs so that assistance to group members in need does not accumulate into hidden debts or coerced obligations.

Participants treat *He* (Harmony) as an ongoing relational achievement that depends on maintaining difference alongside connection, rather than as conflict-avoidance or enforced stability. This emphasis is consistent with Rosenlee's (2024) definition of authentic *He* as a dynamic symbiosis that cannot coexist with oppression or the erasure of agency. Participants offer insights into how this symbiosis is sustained in everyday life where harmony is maintained through anticipatory care, gentle boundary-setting, and the repeated calibration of expectations within ongoing social interactions. As such, we can see how participants manage relational tensions whilst avoiding blame and enabling relationships to function over time.

Collectively, these key findings show that the workshop enables participant engagements in culturally grounded gender transformation, by turning relational practice and the pragmatic reworking of Confucian virtues into everyday resources for dignity, agency, and collective wellbeing.

10.2 Theoretical Implications

The central contribution of this thesis is to social psychology and feminist theory by providing a culturally grounded, non-individualistic orientation towards the cultural re-articulation of gendered relations. Below, I foreground two core theoretical implications. First, that agency is best understood as relational and sustainable rather than primarily individual and exit-based. Second, that relational labour should be theorised as ethical expertise and a universal human competency rather than women's naturalised responsibility.

10.2.1 Toward a Relational and Sustainable Agency

Participant narratives suggest that gender inequities in care relationships and moral expectations including gendered ideals of “good” care are sustained, and at times contested, not only through formal role arrangements, but also through how care is negotiated and enacted within relational structures (Connelly et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2024). Relatedly, in this thesis I sought to reframe agency as a relational and situated phenomenon: as a capacity generated in the intimate rhythms of everyday life, wherein practices “hang together” across roles and obligations (Blue, 2019; Hodgetts et al., 2020; Rosenlee, 2024). Rather than treating agentive empowerment primarily as the ability to exit gender relations, I argue that agency also operates through the cultivation of relational intent, reciprocity, and self-correction as relational skills that promote harmony and change (Rosenlee, 2024; Blue, 2019; Hodgetts et al., 2020).

The enactment of such relational and sustainable agency is visible across the participant narratives, where agency is embodied through boundary-setting, reciprocal contributions to the workshop and familial life, and the cultivation of workable harmony within ongoing relationships. Hua's story illustrates this clearly. Even where “exit” from marriage was constrained, her agency remained active and consequential through the strengthening of other roles (mother, sister, community organiser) and through building relational supports beyond her relationship with her husband (Mahmood, 2012). Similarly, Qiao's account foregrounds agency as the deliberate reworking of domestic expectations through reciprocal partnership and intergenerational pedagogy. Wan's account foregrounds agency through efforts to sustain

dignity through irreplaceable companionship. Gang's account foregrounds agency as protective remonstrance that refuses a "false harmony."

Women's agency-as-relational-resilience emerges in nuanced ways across participant accounts that align with practice-based accounts of everyday life as a "plenum of practices," wherein capacities in one sphere ripple through the "polyrhythmic ensemble" of a person's lifeworld (Blue, 2019). In this view, empowerment becomes more than separation from constraint. Women's empowerment emerges as the durable capacity to negotiate, sustain, and repair relationships while maintaining dignity, thereby shifting theory from "empowerment-as-independence" toward "empowerment-as-relational-resilience."

10.2.2 Relational Labour as Ethical Expertise and a Universal Human Competency

A central theoretical implication of this thesis is that what is often dismissed as "women's work" can be more accurately theorised as ethical expertise. Across participants' accounts, relational labour is not presented as a sentimental personal disposition, passive endurance, or a naturalised feminine personality. Instead, it emerges as a skilled form of practical moral action through which social life is held together and rendered liveable. In this sense, the everyday work of noticing needs, anticipating friction, repairing misunderstandings, coordinating reciprocity, and sustaining connection constitutes a form of competence or ethical expertise that is both culturally meaningful and socially generative.

Through the lens of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism, this expertise can be understood as the enacted interplay of *Ren*, *Li*, and *He*. Participants demonstrate that relational life does not remain workable through goodwill alone. It requires cultivated skills of timing, attunement, boundary-setting, and calibrated responsiveness. These competencies are visible in how women maintain dignity while negotiating gendered obligations, how they organise support without coercion, and how they preserve connections without collapsing differences. The key theoretical point here is that relationality is not only an abstract value. It is produced materially through repeated practices that require judgement, discipline, and moral clarity on the part of participants in this research.

This framing has an important consequence for feminist theory and social psychology. If relational labour is ethical expertise, it cannot remain gendered in a traditional patriarchal form by default without reproducing structural injustices in the social order. My thesis therefore supports the assertion that the competencies required to cultivate humane and sustainable social life in families and society more broadly should be treated as universal human capacities, rather than as women's unpaid responsibility. A more equitable social order requires that men also participate in cultivating and performing these skills, not as "help" given to women, but as shared ethical work necessary for collective flourishing and civic harmony.

In this way, my thesis speaks to broader discourses about culturally grounded feminist theorising (Mohanty, 1988; Pang, 2016), the revaluation of domestic care (The Care Collective, 2020; Rosenlee, 2024), and how everyday practices can sustain or shift gendered social orders (Blue, 2019; Schatzki, 1996). Turning from the level of theory, below I focus on methodological choices that shaped how this research was conducted and how participant accounts were interpreted.

10.3 Methodological Reflections

This thesis offers two core methodological reflections. First, I advance a "with/and" dialogical approach to cross-cultural interpretation, treating analysis as an ongoing and reciprocal process. Second, I offer an initial attempt to operationalise Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism as a situated research orientation that shapes fieldwork engagements, relational ethics, and the interpretation of participants' accounts.

10.3.1 A with/and Dialogical Approach to Cross-cultural Interpretation

In this thesis I advance a with/and approach to the analysis process by treating interpretation as an ongoing dialogue rather than a one-way act of applying a particular feminist theory to participant accounts. Rather than assuming that analytic categories developed in Western feminist and psychological scholarship can be straightforwardly mapped onto Chinese women's lives, I begin with participants' own Chinese culturally derivative moral

vocabularies, narrative logics, and everyday terms as the grounding for their meaning-making. I then searched for relevant concepts to use as provisional and negotiable heuristics for deepening my engagements with participant accounts. My understanding of Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism and social practice theory, for example, was clarified through iterative engagement with participants and their accounts.

Working as a bricoleur, this dialogical stance is operationalised through a staged process of concept-work. Building on established commitments to reflexivity and intersubjectivity in cross-cultural feminist research (Nencel, 2014), I made the interpretive sequence itself an object of method. I first acknowledged plausible Western critical readings of participants' narratives where relevant, including constraint, gendered labour, and the limits of individual "choice" within intimate and institutional life. I then placed these Western readings into conversation with participants' enculturated meanings and Rosenlee's Confucian feminist reinterpretations to widen the interpretive aperture presented in this thesis.

The broader methodological implication is that cross-cultural feminist research can be strengthened by treating analysis as a practice of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008; Hodgetts et al., 2014). Here, accountability is not limited to "getting the concepts right" in an abstract sense; it involves sustained attentiveness to how interpretations might matter to participants and to how academic writing might position their lives, relationships, and moral reasoning (Hodgetts et al., 2014; Wilson, 2008). It also entails accountability to participants' lifeworlds: the ordinary rhythms of the workshop, the relational histories carried in seemingly small remarks, the affective textures of talk, and the material and spatial contexts that give narratives traction and meaning.

This implication also points to the need for interpretive caution about imported conceptual binaries. While binaries such as oppression versus resistance, autonomy versus compliance, tradition versus change, or subjugation versus empowerment can be heuristically useful, they can also narrow what becomes recognisable as agency, care, and ethical action, particularly when moral life is articulated through relational responsibilities and practical negotiations rather than individualistic declarations of freedom. A defensible cross-cultural feminist methodology therefore requires guarding against both conceptual colonisation and cultural romanticism (Smith, 2012), and aims instead to produce culturally adequate accounts of how participants negotiate dignity, care, and agency within evolving moral traditions and present social orders.

This methodological approach to interpretation sits alongside the thesis's theoretical orientation. In the next section, I outline how Confucian feminism shaped both the ethical stance of the study and the interpretive lens I brought to participants' accounts.

10.3.2 Confucian Feminism as a Situated Research Orientation

This thesis also comprises an initial attempt to explore how the theoretical work that underpins Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism can function as a culturally grounded research orientation for narrative inquiry into the experiences of Chinese women. Rather than treating Confucian feminism solely as a theoretical consideration, I drew this philosophical perspective into conversation with participating women. The virtues articulated in Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism were also invaluable in guiding how I entered the workshop respectfully, built ethical relationships with key stakeholders and participating women, and interpreted participant stories.

In this sense, Rosenlee's (2024) Confucian feminism operated in this research as method in the practical meaning of method: an organised way of proceeding that shaped the conduct of the fieldwork, what questions became askable, what kinds of answers became intelligible, and how interpretive authority was negotiated. Further, Confucian feminism strengthened my research ethics by providing a relational approach of responsibility that aligns with participants' moral lifeworlds. It supports a stance in which trust, reciprocity, and care are not treated as preliminary rapport techniques, but as constitutive conditions for producing credible knowledge.

This approach is particularly important in Chinese contexts, where relational legitimacy and long-term attentiveness are often prerequisites for meaningful dialogue and disclosure. In practice, this entailed adopting the role of bricoleur and culturally engaged investigator when working alongside participants in the workshop and engaging them in Fang-tan style interviews informed by Chinese relational practices and obligations (Li & Forbes, 2018; Li et al., 2021). By positioning the researcher-participant relationship within a Confucian feminist ethic of *Ren* and *He*, I offer a concrete example of how culturally resonant ethics can operate in research practice.

I also sought to demonstrate how a culturally embedded ethical approach can do more than “prove” the relevance or utility of theory. This approach enabled me to co-create a research space in which participants were invited to engage in critique, reflection, elaboration, and reinterpretation of core Confucian virtues.

Overall, these methodological implications position this cross-cultural feminist inquiry as a dialogical, culturally accountable, theoretically informed exercise in community-grounded knowledge production. Taken as a whole, the empirical findings, theoretical reframing, and methodological commitments of this thesis converge to inform how gender equality might be approached in practice in China today.

10.4 Policy Implication

Gender equality requires a “care settlement”, not only women’s labour participation

The findings of this research suggest that gender equality in China cannot be secured through women’s labour market participation alone. While expanded access to paid work is an important achievement, it does not automatically transform the everyday organization and gendering of care. When women’s employment rises while domestic, emotional, and kinship labour remain privately absorbed by women, the outcome is often a double burden rather than substantive emancipation and increased equity (Chen et al., 2020; Qi, 2015; Li, 2017; Zhong & Peng, 2020). A key policy implication of this research is to suggest support for a shift toward a care settlement: a social arrangement in which the work of sustaining families and communities is recognised, supported, and redistributed, rather than treated as women’s naturalised responsibility.

From a Confucian feminist perspective, the workshop makes visible what mainstream policy formulations often overlook: relational labour is not sentimental “help,” but rather ethical expertise. Participants’ everyday practices show that harmonious social life may depend, at least in part, on skilled, learned competencies. These include noticing need, anticipating friction, calibrating boundaries, coordinating reciprocity, and repairing misunderstanding. This is also consistent with emotional-labour scholarship, which conceptualises such work as emotion-regulation skills that can be developed over time through strategies such as surface acting (managing outward expression without changing inner feeling) and deep acting

(attempting to align felt emotion with expected display) (Zhang et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2024). However, these strategies are not equally available to everyone. For example, some individuals may become adept at performing the expected emotion without fully feeling it, which is one reason scholars distinguish surface acting from deep acting (Zheng et al., 2024). For this reason, and because such labour can be socially organised and sustained through the recurrent enactment and linking of practices over time (Blue, 2019), I interpret these competencies as both learnable and unevenly distributed.

Moreover, as practices are repeatedly enacted and coordinated into more stable rhythms (Blue, 2019), relational labour can be supported, resourced, and made publicly recognisable within collective settings rather than remaining privatised within households. In this sense, the workshop renders these competencies publicly legible. Through the interplay of *Ren*, *Li*, and *He*, such work becomes legible as cultivated capability rather than gendered instinct. The implication is that care should be treated as a universal human competency and a shared civic responsibility, not as a private feminine duty.

10.5 Limitations / Reflexivity

In this section I reflect on the study's limitations and my own positionality, clarifying how cross-linguistic interpretation and the politically structured "sayable" in a Party Masses Service Centre shaped what could be heard, recorded, and ultimately argued in this research. One practical site where these constraints became visible was in the interactional shape of my interviewing. I occasionally moved too quickly into confirmatory yes/no questions after offering an interpretation, which may have steered responses toward agreement and reduced opportunities for participant-led elaboration or diversion. However, I was reassured that this is not a major limitation of this research because participants sometimes rejected my wording and provided alternative accounts, showing they could disagree with me rather than simply comply with my framing of their accounts. Noticing this pattern informed my reflexive practice throughout fieldwork, prompting more consistent use of open prompts and follow-up invitations to elaborate, though the risk of subtle constraint remains in moments of uncertainty or ambivalence.

More broadly, this interactional sensitivity is inseparable from the cross-linguistic labour of interpretation that shaped the entire project. Although the fieldwork, interviews, and primary meaning-making were conducted in Mandarin (the shared language of the participants and myself), the thesis is written in English. Writing in English positions the thesis within an academic genre that privileges explicit, linear argumentation, signposted inference, and more dualistic reasoning (Kaplan, 1966). This matters because Mandarin is often higher-context, whereas English academic writing is comparatively lower-context and requires meanings to be made more explicit (Hall, 1976). This creates an unavoidable limitation: translating participants' talk, culturally dense concepts, and implicit meanings into an English academic register is not neutral, and it may unintentionally flatten nuance, over-stabilise fluid meanings, or create false equivalences across linguistic and rhetorical systems (Temple & Young, 2004). Nevertheless, I have tried to address these concerns by treating translation as an interpretive procedure rather than a mechanical task (Squires, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010), as outlined in Section 4.6 (Self-positioning as Researcher, Bricoleur and Interpreter).

A further limitation concerns the political and institutional conditions under which narratives become "sayable." This study is situated within a Party Masses Service Centre, which offers legitimacy and safety, but also shapes the interactional boundaries of what participants may feel comfortable articulating about governance, policy, family conflict, and gender inequities. In such settings, participants may self-censor, speak indirectly, or prioritise harmony-preserving accounts, not because their experiences are inauthentic, but because the social consequences of being "too explicit" can be uncertain. This means that participant accounts may privilege forms of critique that are culturally and politically safe, while more confrontational or structurally explicit accounts remain muted, displaced into implication, humour, or silence.

This limitation has analytic consequences. It may reduce the visibility of certain experiences, such as distrust of institutions, overt experiences of resistance, or policy-related grievances. It may also shape how participants describe the workshop itself, particularly if they perceive the site as beneficial, protected, or morally worthy of defence. Although prolonged engagement in the workshop and efforts to cultivate relational trust supported depth of disclosure with participants, the broader fieldwork context still sets limits on what can be voiced and recorded. Accordingly, my analysis should be read as an interpretation of gendered agency

and relational practice within a specific “envelope” of institutional and political intelligibility that is shaped within the present social order.

10.7 Final Reflections

In closing, this thesis I would like to assert that this is a modest yet consequential contribution to Applied Social, Community and Cultural Psychologies. My engagement with issues of agency and social change using a narrative case-based approach foregrounds the importance of culturally grounded forms of mutual exploration in research in social and community psychology (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). Of central note are the complexities and pragmatic negotiations through which broader societal concerns and gendered relations manifest within this particular community group and participant lifeworlds. It is crucial to note here that the women in this study did not simply reproduce cultural tradition, nor did they simply break from it. They engaged in practical meaning making-work that was anchored in their experiences, revising the social grammar of their everyday lifeworlds so that care could remain voluntary, their dignity could be protected, and harmony could be rendered workable.

My research suggests that gender justice requires attention to the relational infrastructures through which women’s wellbeing can be made possible, including the distribution of care labour, the ethics of reciprocity, and the conditions under which people can remain connected without being diminished due to their gender. This thesis therefore invites the revaluation of relational labour as ethical expertise, alongside commitments to building social arrangements in which this expertise is recognised, supported, and shared. Relatedly, participants’ gendering practices remind us that lives can be constrained and still agentic, culturally rooted and still critical, and relational and still dignified. Participant stories show that harmony need not mean silence, and care need not mean subjugation. By tracing how *Xiao*, *Ren*, *Li*, and *He* are re-articulated in everyday life, this thesis offers a third route between rejecting tradition and being trapped within it: a culturally accountable feminism grounded in the practical ethics of living in China today.

My final reflection, then, is that gender equity is not only a matter of rights or roles. It is also a matter of how people learn to live with one another, and of whether the work of sustaining

humane relationships is treated as shared ethical work rather than as an inevitable burden carried primarily by women.

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Appendix

Appendix A1 Original Participant Consent Form (English)

Original Participant Consent Form



School of Psychology, Massey University Albany Campus
Private Bag 102 904, North Shore, Auckland 0745
Ph: 09 414 0800

INFORMATION SHEET –Interview Project Title

This document invites you to participate in a psychology research study conducted by Yuxin (Jade) Huang, a master's student at Massey University, under the supervision of Professor Darin Hodgetts and Dr. Minh- Hieu Nguyen.

We want to learn about the experiences of middle-aged Chinese women regarding social life and wellbeing. We would like you to join this study to share how you use your wisdom as women to create this wonderful craft workshop, and to understand how this craft workshop helps your wellbeing. Please ask if anything is unclear.

You can choose whether or not to participate and can say no at any time without any consequences. If you are willing, we would appreciate hearing your story.

If you decide to join this project, we will talk for about two hours. Everything you say will be kept confidential. We will not tell anyone it was you who made a particular statement. By agreeing to talk with us, you are giving your consent to participate in this study.

If you join this study, here are your rights:

- You can refuse to answer any questions you're not comfortable with
- You can leave the study at any time without any problems
- You can ask questions about the study whenever you want
- We won't use your real name unless you agree. You can choose a different name if you prefer.
- You can see a summary of what we found when the study is finished

If you want to stop being in the study, please let the researcher know within 15 days after your interview.



School of Psychology, Massey University Albany Campus
Private Bag 102 904, North Shore, Auckland 0745
Ph: 09 414 0800

Project Title

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read, or have had read to me in Chinese, and I understand the Information Sheet for this study. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded. (if applicable include this statement)
2. I agree/do not agree to the interview being image recorded. (if applicable include this statement)
3. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me. (if applicable include this statement)
4. I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive. (if applicable include this statement)
5. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name] _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher:

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix A2 Translated Participant Consent Form (Chinese)*Translated Participant Consent Form (Chinese)*

School of Psychology, Massey University Albany Campus
Private Bag 102 904, North Shore, Auckland 0745
Ph: 09 414 0800

访谈信息表
项目名称

这份文件是用来邀请您参加一项关于心理学的研究。这项研究是由梅西大学的黄玉昕同学负责，她的两位导师达林·霍杰茨教授和阮明晓博士会给她指导。

我们想了解年长的中国女性。我们知道您们有很多关于生活和健康的经验和智慧，但是很少有机会去和更多人分享。我们想请您参加这个研究，分享您们是怎么用这些作为女性的经验和智慧来共同创建这个美好的手工小组的，同时也想了解这个手工小组对于您们身心健康的重要性。如果您有任何不明白的地方，可以随时问我。

我们选择邀请您，是因为您非常多有这方面的经验，您的看法对我们很重要。您完全可以选择要不要参加，随时都可以说不，不会有任何后果。如果您愿意，我们很想听听您的故事。

如果您决定参加，我们大约会聊两个小时。您说的每一句话我们都会保密，不会告诉别人是您说的。如果您答应来跟我们聊天，就表示您同意参加这个研究。

如果您参加这个研究，您有以下权利：

- 您可以拒绝回答任何您觉得不适当的问题
- 您可以随时退出研究，没有任何后果
- 您可以随时提出关于研究的问题，我会耐心回答
- 如果您不同意，我们不会使用您的真实姓名。您可以选择您觉得安全的匿名，如果有需要的话。
- 研究结束后，您可以看到研究结果的总结

如果您想退出研究，请在参加访谈后的 15 天内通知研究人员



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研究项目名称
参与者同意书 - 个人

我已经仔细阅读了附件一的信息表，有人用中文给我解释过了。研究人员也向我说明了研究的细节，回答了我的问题。我知道如果还有不明白的地方，我随时都可以继续问。我有足够的时间考虑要不要参加这项研究。我也明白参加是自愿的，我随时都可以退出。

1. 您愿不愿意让我们录下谈话的声音？（如果需要的话）
2. 您愿不愿意让我们录下视频？（如果需要的话）
3. 您想不想要一份录音的副本？（如果有录音的话）
4. 您同不同意我们把资料存档？（如果需要的话）
5. 如果您同意以上说明的内容，我们就开始进行研究。

参与者声明：

我 _____ [正楷填写全名] _____ 同意参加这项研究。

签名: _____ 日期: _____

Interpretive Interview Guide and Stimulus Materials (English)

1. Xiao (Filial Piety) | 孝

Traditional Interpretation

In the past, *Xiao* meant children had to be completely obedient to their parents, especially their fathers. Children were not allowed to ask "why"; they simply had to obey.

Modern Interpretation

Xiao is more than simple obedience; it represents the fundamental moral foundation of family relationships. It encompasses mutual care between generations and emphasises that our moral growth begins with how we treat our family.

Reflection Questions

- What did being a "good daughter" mean to you while you were growing up?
- Can you share a story about how your parents cared for or taught you? How did it affect you?
- How did you care for your parents or elders as a child?
- How do you care for and educate your own children? Please share an experience that was particularly meaningful for you or your child.

3. Li (Ritual/Propriety) | 礼

Traditional Interpretation

Traditionally, *Li* was viewed as a set of rigid rules. These rules allowed those with higher status to control those below them and permitted men to control women (such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues").

Modern Interpretation

Li is a form of wisdom reflecting one's keen observation and understanding of interactions with the outside world. It should be a flexible guideline, emphasising how *Ren* (Benevolence) finds the appropriate way to relate to others in different situations.

Confucius said, "In the practice of *Li*, harmony is the most valuable". This means the essence of *Li* is social harmony, not clinging to old gender restrictions or forced regulations. As environments and people change, *Li* must also evolve to maintain harmony. Rules that ignore the needs and development of women should be changed for the sake of true social harmony.

Reflection Questions

- Do you believe women must always follow social rules, or do you feel rules should change when they are disadvantageous to people (especially women)?
- Can you share an experience where you or a woman you know changed a rule or refused to agree to an unreasonable one?

2. Ren (Benevolence/Humaneness) | 仁

Traditional Interpretation

Previously, *Ren* was seen as an exclusive virtue of noble men, primarily manifested in the hierarchical relationships of a class system. It was often understood as the benevolent management of subordinates by rulers.

Modern Interpretation

Ren was originally conceived as a universal capacity for sympathy and moral development. Restricting *Ren* to a male-centred virtue actually contradicts its essence as a fundamental characteristic of human goodness.

As a universal virtue that transcends gender, *Ren* is embodied through empathy and compassion for others. It grows from the filial piety nurtured at home and extends to society. Anyone, regardless of gender, who demonstrates care and sympathy is practising the Way of *Ren*.

Reflection Questions

- Can you share an experience of caring for a family member, even a small everyday act? How did they respond, and how did it make you feel?
- Can you share an experience of helping or caring for someone outside your family? How did they respond, and how did it make you feel?

4. He (Harmony) | 和

Traditional Interpretation

In the past, *He* meant everyone had to follow rules and obey authority, emphasising suppression and sacrifice. For example, differing opinions were discouraged, even if someone disagreed internally, they could not speak up for fear of breaking the surface-level peace.

Modern Interpretation

He is not about everyone being identical or just following orders. True harmony is created when people use mutual understanding and communication to integrate different ideas into something new. If everyone were the same, society would stagnate; forced obedience does not lead to genuine harmony.

Practical Example: Harmonising Different Needs (The Family Dinner)

To understand the abstract concept of *He* (Harmony), consider a simple family scenario where everyone is deciding where to eat: the mother wants Sichuan cuisine, the father prefers Cantonese, and the child wants Western food. True harmony is not achieved by simply forcing the child to obey the parents or letting the loudest voice win. Instead, it involves the whole family discussing the options together to find a creative solution—such as having Sichuan tonight, Cantonese next weekend, and Western food the following week. Through this process of communication and mutual understanding, a new path is created where everyone's ideas are respected and genuine family unity is maintained.

Reflection Questions

- Can you share an experience where you maintained family or community harmony while also looking after your own needs? How did this feel?
- Can you share an experience where someone else looked after your needs while they were doing their own thing? How did that feel?

Appendix B2 Interpretive Interview Guide and Stimulus Materials (Chinese)

Interpretive Interview Guide and Stimulus Materials (Chinese)

1. 孝

传统解释:

在以前，孝就是孩子必须完全听父母的话，特别是听爸爸的话。孩子们不能问为什么，只能乖乖听话。

新解释:

孝不仅仅是简单的服从，而是代表了家庭关系中最基本的道德发展基础。它包含了每一代人之间的互相关怀，强调我们的道德成长始于如何对待家人。

问题:

“在你成长的过程中，做一个‘好女儿’意味着什么？”

“你能讲一个关于你父母是如何照顾你和教导你的故事吗？对你有什么影响？”

“你小时候又是如何照顾父母或长辈的？”

你是怎么照顾和教育你的孩子的呢？可以分享一个你觉得对你或者你的孩子来说意义比较大的经历。

3. 礼

传统解释:

以前的人认为礼，就是一些很严格的规矩。这些规矩让有地位的人可以管没地位的人，让男人可以管女人，比如三从四德。

新解释:

礼是一种体现个人对外界互动敏锐观察和理解能力的智慧。它应该是一个灵活的准则，强调礼如何在不同场合和关系中找到恰当的相处之道。

孔子说“礼在用，和为贵”，意思是礼的本质是关注如何让社会更和谐，而不是固守旧有的性别限制或强制规定某个群体应该做什么。环境和人都在变，礼不变，又如何能维系和？为了社会和谐那些忽视女性需求和发展的“礼”或者说规则就应该变。

问题:

“你认为女性是否必须始终遵循社会规则，还是你觉得当这些规则对人们（特别是女性）不利时，规则就应该改变？”

你能分享一个你或你认识的女性改变规则或者不答应不合理的规则的经历吗？”

2. 仁

传统解释:

以前的人认为，“仁”被视为贵族男性的专属美德，主要体现在等级制度中的上下关系中。它通常被理解为统治者对下属的仁慈管理。

新解释:

仁最初就被构想为一种普遍的同情心和道德发展能力。如果将仁局限于男性中心的美德，实际上与其作为人性善的本质特征相矛盾。

仁是超越性别的普世美德，体现为对他人的同理心和同情心。它源于家庭中培养的孝道，从关爱家人并延伸至整个社会。无论男女，只要展现对他人的关怀和同情，就是在践行仁道或者仁爱。

问题:

你能跟我分享一个照顾家人的经历吗？即使是日常生活中的小事也可以。

他们是怎么回应的？
这些经历给你带来了什么感受？

你能跟我分享一个照顾或帮助非家人的人的经历吗？即使是日常生活中的小事也可以。

他们是怎么回应的？
这些经历给你带来了什么感受？

4. 和

传统解释:

以前的人认为“和”就是要大家都服从规矩，听从权威，强调压抑和牺牲。比如，不能有不同意见。如果有人心里不同意，也不能说出来打破表面的和平。

新解释:

“和”不只是大家要一样或听从命令。人们通过互相理解 and 交流，让不同的想法可以融合在一起，创造新的东西，那才是“和”。如果大家都是一模一样，社会反而会停滞不前。强迫别人服从也不会带来真正的和谐。

比如说：一家人在讨论周末去哪里吃饭。妈妈想吃川菜，爸爸想吃粤菜，孩子想吃西餐。真正的“和”不是简单地让孩子听父母的，或者谁的声音大听谁的。而是全家一起商量：可以今天吃川菜，下周末吃粤菜，再下周去尝试孩子想吃的西餐。通过沟通和互相理解，创造出新的解决办法，既保持了家庭和睦，又让每个人的想法都得到了尊重。

问题:

你能分享一个在维护家庭或社区和谐的同时，也照顾到自己需求的经历吗？”这种维系和谐给你什么感觉？

你能分享一个别人在做自己的事情的时候也照顾到你的需求的经历吗？这给你什么感觉？