The Value in Storytelling: Women’s Life-Stories in Confucianism and Judaism

Galia Patt-Shamir

Abstract This essay retells the stories of four exemplary women from Confucianism and Judaism, hoping that the tension these stories exhibit can teach us something about women’s lives within the boundaries of tradition, then and now. It refers to two ideal “family caretakers”: Meng Mu 孟母, who devoted her life to her son’s learning, and Rachel, who devoted her life to her husband, the famous Rabbi Akiva. Then it tells the stories of two almost completely opposing exemplary figures: The sages Ban Zhao 班昭 and Bruriah, who dedicated their lives to learning and self-cultivation. It stresses that there is more than one dichotomized resolution to inner conflicts within the traditional framework in both Confucianism and Judaism, and, moreover, the plurality of resolutions is inherent in the traditions. Through reading a story and appreciating the complexities in others’ lives, while reflecting on our own, we can attain a level of abstraction that enables better sensitivity and more responsibility for the life we live.

Keywords Learning · Family · Women · Confucianism · Judaism

1 Introduction

Good stories about people’s lives have life-force, which embodies the essence of the tradition from which they arise. Stories entail the values of the tradition they reflect, yet while the values aspire at universality, stories by nature transfigure and assume various forms of displaying the values. Interestingly, in this way stories can furnish their readers a better look into values, which persist through the varying forms. So philosophers and scholars of a tradition should not take a story at face-value, sticking to its “dress” and forgetting the values, the message, and the life within it. According to the present perspective, when two different, even opposing, stories reflect the same tradition, they force us to rethink not only the traditions they embody but also our different ways of realizing the
values that inhere in the stories. The multiplicity of stories and of the ways of life they represent can also foster a pluralistic attitude.

In this essay, I shall retell the stories of four exemplary women from two traditions, Confucianism and Judaism, in the belief that the tension these stories exhibit can teach us something about women’s lives within the boundaries of tradition, then and now. More specifically, first I refer to two ideal “family caretakers”: Mengzi’s mother (barely known by her name) and Rachel, Rabbi Akiva’s famous wife. Both are considered ideal women in the traditional sense: MENG Mu 孟母 (literally means the mother [mu 母] of Mencius [meng 孟]) devoted her life to her son’s learning, Rachel to her husband’s. Then I will tell the stories of two almost completely contrasting exemplary figures: the sages BAN Zhao 班昭 and Bruriah, each of whom dedicated her life to learning and self-cultivation in a less traditional way, while maintaining a family life that seems insupportably complex. Since both Confucianism and Judaism endorse old traditions, family caretaking and learning alike have special importance in tradition-keeping. However, in both traditions, the stories present us with a severe conflict in women’s lives, between learning and family caretaking as major values. Human social history has polarized these values, to the point of an existential division: a woman stays at home and gives up learning; a man may leave the family and devote himself to learning (see Patt-Shamir 2009). This dichotomy raises the question whether the fracture and the discrimination is inherent in the traditions and cannot be changed within the boundaries of tradition.

The stories I tell are not easy to handle for a modern woman who wishes to find resolution within traditional boundaries. Plenty of evidence attests that in both Confucianism and Judaism equality between men and women was missing. In this article, I seek to stress that more than one dichotomized resolution to inner conflicts exists within the traditional framework in both Confucianism and Judaism; moreover, the plurality of resolutions is inherent in the traditions. While this is exemplified in the present essay by four women from two traditions, who basically suggest two opposing models, more stories, more models, and more interpretations can broaden our understanding. My position is that while both Confucianism and Judaism are profoundly traditionalistic, the stories suggest a plurality of possibilities for interpreting values, a variety of ways to live up to these values, and a diversity of approaches to understanding. Through open-minded rereading and imaginative interpretation we may reach a constructive distinction rather than an oppressive discrimination, and thus make the tension “creative.” Through reading a story and appreciating the complexities in others’ lives, while reflecting on our own, we can develop sensitivity to the richness of value–practicing and responsibility for the life we live.

2 Two Ideal Family Caretakers: Zhangxi, Mother of Mengzi, and Rachel, Wife of Rabbi Akiva

The greatness of the most celebrated mother, probably the most celebrated woman in Chinese history, rests primarily on her educating her son to be the great philosopher he became, sacrificing any personal need or desire of her own. That we are not absolutely certain about her name is not even strange. According to legend it was ZHANG Shi 仉氏 (from the “Zhang” family), yet she is usually known as “Mengzi’s mother” (Meng Mu 孟母), whose son became the great philosopher Mengzi 孟子 (371–289 BCE). She changed her residence three times to find the best surroundings for her son’s upbringing. First, the mother and her young son lived near a cemetery, where the boy played among tombs, troubled by scenes related to death and mourning. Next, they moved to a house in the...