ABSTRACT

Scholars who claim that Confucianism discriminates women often cite sayings of Confucius as their evidence to support their clause. Among these quotations, the saying that “Women (nuzi) and Small-minded men (xiaoren) are most difficult to deal with; if you get close to them, they become insolent, if you keep a distance away from them, they complain.” (“唯女子与小人为难养也，近之则不孙，远之则怨” ) is the most frequently seen. Many tend to comprehend nuzi as referring to women in general, and xiaoren as the small-minded men, and hence, derive the equation of women and small-minded men in terms of morality and intelligence. And with above equation, many jump to the conclusion that Confucius meant that women are as difficult to deal with as the small-minded men.

This paper proposes a different way of reading the above saying. We can get some insights of how Confucius views women by examining the words yang (meaning “taking care of” literally), nuzi and xiaoren. In particular, the word, yang, tells us that this sentence does not imply that nuzi and xiaoren are hard to deal with because of their morality and intelligence. It only means to take care of the both of them requires hard work on the care-giver’s side. And more importantly, the word nuzi does not refer to the female sex, but rather, the female being. While many view gender and sex as equivalent, Confucius considers them as separate concepts and view women in terms of their different roles, i.e. the mother, the daughter and the wife.

In this case, nuzi refers only to women in the household, and therefore, xiaoren, refers to servants in the same context. By saying this, we must be careful to note that this does not consist of the role of mother. Confucius and others of his time regarded the role of the
mother with special respect. *Nuxi* includes wives, daughters and servant-maids in the household and Confucius emphasized that the duties of these women are mainly within the home. Even so, it does not mean women are being excluded from the society. As a matter of fact, Confucius does not object to women being politically active, it is just that women are involved in a different manner.