

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF A CONFUCIAN FAMILY-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS ON CHINESE TEENAGE GIRLS' DECISION-MAKING IN CASE OF UNPLANNED PREGNANCY

Nsengiyumva Ladislav, SJ[♦]

Boston College

Abstract

Confucian Family-based ethics of virtue is founded on three important virtues "he" (和) or harmony, "ren" (仁) which can be defined as *benevolence, love or humanity* and the practice of "li" (禮) or rituals. Besides, the meaning and applications of this theory have received special attention in the past few decades due to the increasing global interest in Chinese culture and thoughts. In this paper, we will explore the basic internal dynamic framework of traditional and modern Chinese families in order to build a new framework of interpersonal dynamics. We will proceed by engaging *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, the work of Fan Rui Ping, in order to explore how these virtues, as seen from the traditional Confucian family, may affect freedom of choice in decision-making. We will work through comparison of the current situation of an ordinary Chinese family's interpersonal dynamics and their possible implications on the decision-making process of young college teenage girls facing the consequences of terminating an unplanned pregnancy. We will contend that, in undermining the freedom of decision-making, the popular understanding of the

[♦]**Nsengiyumva Ladislav, SJ** is an STL student at the School of Theology and Ministry of Boston college. He holds a Medical Degree from Peking University in China, an MA in Philosophy from Ateneo de Manila University and an STB/MDiv from Fugen Faculty of Theology of St Robert Bellarmine. He has taught Medical Ethics and Philosophy of Man at the faculty of Medicine of Fugen Catholic University, Taipei. Email: ladisj@gmail.com

traditional Confucian family's demands on each family member is responsible for the increasing number of abortions among teenage girls.

Keywords: Abortion, Confucian Ethics, Family, Harmony, Teenage Girls, Virtue

1. Confucian Family Dynamics: Tradition and Modernity

1.1. The Traditional Confucian Family

Chinese culture has always valued the status of a family in the nation. Even for the political leader, Confucius would say that, if he cannot play his proper role at the family level, he could not be able to lead others. Besides, the running of a family is sustained by what Confucius calls *li* (禮) or rites. Rites, as it were, are not external rituals performed without internal freedom and consent. They are acts performed as duties that contribute to the foundation of vital family relationships and thereby, growth in virtues. From here, we can see how important the mutual relationships in a family are. If lived properly, these relationships will lead to another crucial element in a Confucian family — that is harmony (和).

Harmony is the guiding force which, not only keeps everyone in the family accountable for each act done that influences the life of the family, but also it may lead some members of the family to act in ways that may undermine the very fabric of the family. In this paper, we will attempt to show that, just as the Chinese government has frequently been accused of using unethical means that harm its population for the sake of national harmony, the desire to maintain family harmony has also led to severe consequences — one of which is the decline in birth rate partly due to the recourse to abortion by young women and another being the abortion of female foetuses.

1.2. Facing Modernity: Sexual Revolution?

Decades after the One Child Policy was implemented, its consequences have taken various shapes influencing Chinese society. In fact, not only are Chinese families struggling to fill in the gap of an increasingly aging society but the government itself is facing the eternal haunting ghost of the burning desire for a harmonious and well-balanced population. As Fincher puts it: "Restless single men are seen as a threat to the foundation of the Chinese society. And single women threaten the fabric of society as well, for being free agents,

unnatural in failing to perform their duty to give birth to a child and tame a restless man.”¹

From this statement we can see how worried the government is and also the danger that it might not be able to implement sustainable policies in order to address the other reproductive health issues that have more to do with culture. In fact, aside from the increasing number of women who do not want to marry and the restless men who are always on the hunt for possible brides, sexual activities continue to take place oftentimes under the umbrella of a society that, while it yearns to be understood as conservative, does not provide teenagers with resources necessary for their sexual and emotional maturity. As a matter of fact, recent research by Li confirms that teenage pregnancy has already become an economic and public health problem in China.²

Moreover, due to some ongoing sexual revolution, sexual activities among teenagers in China are much higher than two decades ago and there is lack of information about reproductive health.³ However, some adults would also say that during the teenage years, even if at the surface it seemed like young people were more disciplined in sexual matters, the real situation was totally different. This can also help to explain the result of the research done several years ago concerning not only sexual activities but also one possible consequence — abortion:

Of the sexually active students, 11.6% females reported a history of pregnancy, and 10.6% males reported that a partner had such a history. A history of induced abortion was reported by 11.3% females, and 10.0% males reported this history in a partner. Up to 33.7% females and 22.5% males thought they or a partner could possibly or highly possibly become pregnant by sexual intercourse, with females having significantly higher risk awareness than males ($\chi^2 = 53.271$, $pb .001$).⁴

1.3. Why Do These Girls Have Recourse to Abortion?

In many countries, teenage girls terminate pregnancies for diverse reasons. Most of the time, it is the fear of not being able to raise the

¹Hong Fincher Leta, *Asian Arguments: Leftover Women, The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, London: Zed Books, 2014, 23.

²Liping Wu, “A Survey on the Knowledge, Attitude, and Behavior Regarding Contraception Use among Pregnant Teenagers in Beijing, China,” *Clinical Nursing Research* 19, 4 (November 2010) 405.

³Wu, “A Survey on the Knowledge, Attitude, and Behavior...,” 404-405.

⁴Qiaoqin Ma et al., “Unintended Pregnancy and its Risk Factors among University Students in Eastern China,” *Contraception* 77, 2 (2008) 109.

child or the danger of being forced to marry, or again the danger of being forced out of school and thereby losing any hope for the future. In China, as research recently done by Wang and his collaborators found, the reasons behind abortions are different. They state: "In China people are deeply influenced by traditional culture in which the premarital pregnancy is discouraged. Students in China may therefore terminate the pregnancy before it is found by others in order to protect their personal reputation."⁵

Why is personal reputation so crucial in the Chinese culture and why does the search for maintaining it lead to such a disastrous decision as to terminate a pregnancy? Is this reputation simply a teenage girl's desire to maintain her image of an innocent and well-behaved girl or does it have to do with much deeper social demands?

As an answer to these questions, it is crucial to remember that Chinese families are built on the Confucian understanding of interpersonal relations based on keeping harmony at all costs. However, for teenage girls, this search for harmony does not help the individual face one's wrongdoing with perspective for growth. In general, Confucianism allows for making mistakes because it acknowledges that the sense of shame is the beginning of the determination to improve oneself.⁶ However, when a teenage girl becomes pregnant out of wedlock, the primary thing she needs to consider is what this condition or situation means to her family. What will be the impact of her decision with regard to a pregnancy that, if continued, will deeply challenge her relationship with the family members? Being in school, the primary purpose will be to complete studies with good marks in order to honour her family and the whole lineage. For this reason, any decision made will have to take root in the satisfaction of her parents. Nonetheless, this effort to satisfy the parents, although it aims at some good, goes beyond any mere calculation of advantages and disadvantages. It is an inner determination to uphold the dignity of the family even at the cost of one's life. The extent of this relationship finds echo in Fan's account of it in his *Reconstructionist Confucianism*:

Parent-child love is not romantic love. It engages a deep affection towards and selfless care of each other, having nothing to do with mutual sexual

⁵Hongjing Wang et al., "Contraception and Unintended Pregnancy among Unmarried Female University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study from China," *PLoS one* 10, 6 (2015) 8.

⁶Qiyun Zhang, *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation*, trans. Orient Lee, Singapore: World Scientific, 2013, 94.

attraction or impulses. It is not even reciprocal — the parental love of one's children or the children's love of their parents is not the granting of privileges in return for similar privileges from the other side in the future. It is nonsensical to say that they are making mutual concessions with each other for self-benefit. The meaning of their love transcends any sense of contract.⁷

What then is the motivating force behind the young woman who accepts the possible risks of both psychological and physical suffering through abortion? In this paper, we will contend that it is the overwhelming desire to please one's parents and maintain some sort of family harmony that compel the teenager to take the risks.

But there remains another big problem. If the motivation is not based on deep inner conviction about the act but on mere conformism to the life norms as established by the family and the society, there arises the possibility of the young woman not taking her responsibility to avoid yet another pregnancy. Even availability of contraceptive devices or medicines may not yield positive results.

In fact, even if the research of Wang shows that the use of contraceptive measures was associated with the decrease in the number of unintended pregnancies,⁸ the general increase in the number of abortions as observed for example in Taiwan — a Confucian country — through what is called “the September abortion waves” or anytime in a year⁹ calls into question the possibility of the promotion of contraception alone as the best way to curb unwanted pregnancies.

1.4. Toward a Solution to the Increased Number of Abortions in China

As we stated in this paper from the beginning, any viable solution to the problem should take into consideration the family. Here, the young women grow and mature, shape their worldview, draw the wisdom to survive in this ever changing world. However, the Confucian environment is not very suitable for a normal growth in decision-making due to the controls that the family put on the children. Similar situations of lack of freedom to make choices are found in Chinese history through diverse forms. A good example is the fact that, even if marriage should take many considerations like age, economic independence, etc., in Chinese rural areas, young men are still forced by their peasant parents to marry at a young age in

⁷Ruiping Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism: Rethinking Morality after the West*, Dordrecht, Holland: Springer, 2010, 16.

⁸Wang et al., “Contraception and Unintended Pregnancy...,” 9.

⁹Jimmy Lin, “The Bitter Taste of Forbidden Fruit: Dealing with Teenage Pregnancy,” *Taiwan Panorama*, April 2004, 70.

order to assert more control and authority on their sons and maintain a supply of labour because, in this case, they have to live with their parents.¹⁰ Besides, love marriages have been generally discouraged throughout Chinese history.¹¹ In the absence of a cultural foundation to help curb the problem, education programs should be established to inform young people on reproductive health issues and the need to take these matters seriously and responsibly. Recent publications in the area of reproduction health have valued the need for information as shown below:

Efforts should therefore be made to draw the attention of parents, teachers and the society as whole to the need to improve students' knowledge of contraception and reproduction. Students' organizations and students themselves should also act proactively to promote these educational activities.¹²

Why is engaging families so crucial and how should the government engage them? One approach may be to provide data that show the extent to which the situation of abortion among adolescent girls has gone. For example, as a recent survey shows, 95% of the surveyed female sex workers in China had unintended pregnancies and 93% of the pregnancies were terminated.¹³ The statistics among teenage girls in college or recent graduates may present similar alarming figures. Therefore, family education in order to reach all levels of those most at risk of unintended pregnancy should be valued.

An education that fosters ideals of the Confucian family that uphold childhood education in virtues has failed in many ways. This can be seen, for example in recent research which shows that, not only is there a growing number of adolescent female sex workers in China but also half of them had undergone abortions and only 27% had received sexual and reproductive health information from health care providers.¹⁴ Reproductive health information should be coupled with family education on the virtues. We will discuss this education in details later.

¹⁰Patricia Ebrey, "The Chinese Family and the Spread of Confucian Values," in *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, 77-78.

¹¹Joseph B. Tamney and Linda H. Chiang, *Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002, 133.

¹²Wang et al., "Contraception and Unintended Pregnancy...", 9

¹³Megan S.C. Lim et al., "Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge, Contraception Uptake, and Factors Associated with Unmet Need for Modern Contraception among Adolescent Female Sex Workers in China," *PloS one* 10, 1 (2015) 10.

¹⁴Lim et al., "Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge...", 13.

The interpersonal dynamics within a Confucian family guided by the virtues of harmony *he* (和), humanity *ren* (仁) and rituals *li* (禮) are very crucial in understanding what happens in the minds of these young women. I also contend that the proper understanding of these crucial virtues will help us to find out and formulate what can be done in order to help Chinese families help the teenage girls grow in independent decision-making and get over the problems of reproductive health.

2. The Influence of the Three Virtues on Decision-Making

2.1. The Influence of *he* (和) or Harmony in the Confucian Family

According to Fan, harmony or *he* (和) calls family members to share their decision-making with others in the process of ordering their lives and taking actions.¹⁵ This characteristic of a Confucian family is usually the guiding principle even at the level of the administration of social and political institutions. As a matter of fact, Chinese politicians have also notoriously practiced this virtue in policy making for harmonious relations with other countries.¹⁶

What does it mean for an adolescent girl to undergo an abortion in a system that expects her participation in the building up of harmonious relations? First of all, for the girl to have a boyfriend is already problematic. As a matter of fact, romantic love has always been discouraged and despised by society.¹⁷ Therefore, even if by having an abortion, the adolescent girl chooses an extreme solution, it is because she has to submit to what the family expects from her. She should not do anything that may anger her parents who will not approve of a child born out of wedlock. At the same time, she puts her life in danger in order to preserve the “face” of her family. Moreover, by doing so, she does not so much consider the relationship that has led to such a decision. In other words, the harmony with her family becomes more important than with her boyfriend. In fact, if it happens that his or his family’s economic situation is not good, he will all the more be rejected because, as Tam tells us, the financial status continues to influence social and intimate relationships.¹⁸

¹⁵Ruiping Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 29.

¹⁶John H. Berthrong, “Confucian Formulas for Peace: Harmony 和,” *Society* 51, 6 (2014) 654.

¹⁷Joseph B. Tamney and Linda H. Chiang, *Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies*, 133.

¹⁸Siumi Tam, Wai C. Wong, and Danning Wang, *Gender and Family in East Asia*, London: Routledge, 2014, 5.

Besides, the reaction of the teenage girl may be the manifestation of an effort to overcome her socially long-suppressed ego and an avoidance of falling prey to the possible young man's control of her life. In fact, as Johnson tells us, the situation prevalent in the twentieth century made women feel the need to fight for a stake in families that denied them full human status.¹⁹ In another book by Gilbert Rozman, we are told that the Confucian family expected married women to be mothers and homemakers, submissive unconditionally by being just daughters-in-law before a powerful patriarch and his wife.²⁰ This situation is still prevalent today though with women or feminist awareness of the need to change this particular cultural feature.

Furthermore, the economic situation of today's China still bears the scars of gender inequalities that may affect the way females relate with male counterparts. As a matter of fact, in another account, we are told that women's unemployment rate has been on the rise since the beginning of globalization,²¹ putting stress on the teenage girl who understands that she will have to rely on the domineering male if she chooses to get married without even finishing college. This would be a controversial choice that cannot be accepted in a Confucian tradition that aims at self-protection and avoidance of losing face. The Confucian struggle for harmony within the family will indeed require that one give more weight to the benefits of the family member rather than to strangers.²²

I would like to argue here that an adolescent who grows up making decisions in this way will gradually end up not respecting the meaning of harmony in her own future family. The possibility of arriving at this situation seems high and requires, from my observation, a new look at the very meaning of harmony in the Confucian family and what means are offered to attain or maintain it. I would like to argue that the search for harmony in all human interactions is very important. However, there is also a need to bring this search to account in order to make sure that no extremes come

¹⁹Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 21.

²⁰Gilbert Rozman, "Comparisons of Modern Confucian Values in China and Japan," in *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, 168.

²¹Jinghao Zhou, *Chinese Vs. Western Perspectives: Understanding Contemporary China*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, 62.

²²Ruiping Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 20.

into play. Before proceeding further, it may be good to have a look at what Barrett tells us about Confucian harmony:

Like other normative traits of harmony, the value of balance should be understood simultaneously as aesthetic and moral, that is, both as an intrinsic good and as conducive to flourishing. As an aesthetic value, balance cannot be justified; it simply has to be appreciated or enjoyed. As a moral value, balance functions to preserve difference, keeping contrary elements from intruding upon or overpowering one another and is thus important for stability and endurance and perhaps growth as well.²³

The value of balance mentioned in this passage is very crucial in decision-making about the termination of a pregnancy. Barrett's emphasis on the need for keeping the tension between opposite positions and endurance is of greater influence in the process of decision making about the termination or not of pregnancy. Nevertheless, given the increasing number of abortions among adolescents, endurance and tension seems to have given place to a conformism that does not pave the way to the enhancement of differences so central in the nature of harmony.²⁴ In fact, when the differences are not established, the adolescent woman will grow up immature and unable to affirm her value through decision-making that is responsible. This is totally different from what Confucius would seem to suggest. In fact, for Confucius, the mind of each individual should be the centre of moral judgment and one should be free to follow one's conscience.²⁵ We see here that today's Chinese families have failed to uphold the authentic Confucian understanding of personal judgment. For the teenage girl to follow only what the parents expect of her will destroy the basic structure of family harmony that is sought in a Confucian family. Barrett echoes this when he says: "Therefore — and this is a crucial point — through fuller realization of various kinds of interpersonal harmony, an individual realizes both the particular values that constitute her own identity and the particular values of the persons to whom she relates."²⁶

The need to search through the values one upholds and weigh them against the values of others may help stem the risk of either one of them making undiscerned decisions. There is, therefore, a need to share one's experiences with family members and try to compromise.

²³Nathaniel F. Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," *Sophia* (2014) 151.

²⁴Nathaniel F. Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," 152.

²⁵Wei Bin Zhang, *Confucianism and Modernization: Industrialization and Democratization of the Confucian Regions*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1999, 29.

²⁶Nathaniel F. Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," 153.

According to Chuang, the degree to which what he calls CS (Communal Sharing) is followed by a family could be shown by three indices: "... total level of love displayed, symmetry (reciprocity) of love between dyadic relations, and equivalence (less differentiation) of love."²⁷ The communal sharing within a community is, as found in Chuang's study on Confucian family interactions, fundamental for close family interactions.²⁸ As Chuang noted again, this sharing will in return induce more love and equivalent love toward other family members²⁹ creating perfect harmony. However, as opposed to what Chuang says, I believe that in the Confucian family, it is not possible to have the so-called equivalent love no matter what the degree of communal sharing. There will still be a degree of differentiated love relationship, which will always depend on whether the family member has contributed or not to the family harmony or wellbeing. As a matter of fact, Chuang also acknowledges that affective reciprocity happens more between spouses than between parents and children.³⁰ Therefore, the hostility that may be created by the disclosure of a pregnancy will put the adolescent girl in a state of hostility with her parents. Although Chuang claims that hostility will not contribute to bringing harmony and well being,³¹ it does not seem to be the case in any normal family. Families that dare to confront difficulties together, even when conflicts arise in the process, will still maintain harmony. A family that does not share is the one that will likely not enter into any level of hostility. However, this will contradict Chuang's own statement about the need for communal sharing in order to attain harmony.

Even if it becomes very difficult to share something that one knows will clearly bring shame to the family, disclosure will bring both inner peace for the adolescent and, most likely, some support in decision-making from her family. Following Confucius' position on personal growth as already mentioned, it is worth recognizing that another important element in the search for harmony in such circumstances is that of shame. When an adolescent woman finds herself pregnant, she may feel a sense of shame for having acted

²⁷Yao-Chia Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony and Well-being: Test of Interpersonal Theory, Relational-Models Theory, and Confucian Ethics," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 8 (2005) 274.

²⁸Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 288.

²⁹Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 288.

³⁰Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 281.

³¹Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 282.

against the norms of her family and the society at large. Using Barrett's understanding of shame, the adolescent should learn to accept this shame not only because it is the hallmark of sensitivity to values but also is an opportunity for "wider harmony and deeper enjoyment."³²

As a conclusion, even if we considered the concept of *he* or harmony as an independent entity, *ren* (仁) or humanism or again, love as defined by Fan, is very crucial and linked to *he* (和) or harmony. Moreover, its relation to *he* (和) or harmony will define in a more refined manner a reconstruction of the family relationships.

2.2. The Role of Ren (仁) or Humanity in the Process of Decision-Making

According to Fan, *ren* (仁) defined as love means that one must love one's relatives and gradually extend this love to others.³³ Besides, he claims that *ren* (仁) can neither be understood nor be cultivated without the understanding of the performance of Confucian rituals.³⁴ *Ren* (仁) is also the starting point and the highest standard in character formation.³⁵ We have seen above that the wrong process of making decisions for the adolescent girl is to exclude her boyfriend from her considerations. By removing the boyfriend from the decision-making, the adolescent girl takes away his humanity. As a consequence, she also loses her humanity because the very relation of love coming from human-heartedness that existed between them and the resulting pregnancy is thwarted. As she tries to alienate herself from the boyfriend, she ceases, using the words of Fan, "being true human."³⁶ I would like to argue that, the very desire to extend love and harmony through an abortion does not pave the way for the success of the endeavour. In fact, it seems to be a disordered way of proceeding because, by excluding one party that was constitutive of the current state of affairs, benevolence or humanity and even the harmony that was being sought within the family is lost. The adolescent girl will lose all the inner connections between her acts

³²Nathaniel F. Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," 157.

³³Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 29.

³⁴Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, xvii.

³⁵Qiyun Zhang, *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation*, trans. Orient Lee, Singapore: World Scientific, 2013, 14.

³⁶Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 18.

and her motivations. To recover her ren (仁), she needs to make sure that harmony is an external gesture that has internal expression. Without the internal expression that results from true discernment, the decision made for terminating the pregnancy will be faulted and the teenage girl will not find peace in herself. Tang echoes this view when he explains the need for inner cultivation:

If our internal and external beings are harmonious, the chaos of a disordered world cannot disturb our inner peace. If we are not centred and harmonious in our internal and external being, even if there is a very well-ordered world outside, we will still be troubled, worried, or perturbed. We must work hard at cultivating our own virtue whether the world at large is in chaos or is in order. In this way, we can fulfill our life's duty and when it is time to leave the world, we can go with a sense of peace and fulfillment.³⁷

Therefore, neither traditional Confucianism nor the Reconstructionist Confucianism that is advocated by Fan bring any solution to the problems faced by adolescent girls in modern China. This position finds echoes in Tang's claim that the ancient sages' thoughts should not be understood as capable of solving contemporary problems but they only show a path for thinking and hint at how to use the cultural resources.³⁸ For example, there is a need to reconsider whether the very fabric of family is not being torn apart due to the gradual degradation of morals in today's China. As already stated above, even Chuang's suggested family harmony and well being of each member derived from Confucian ethical system³⁹ cannot, according to our understanding, be met in modern China. In another major work, Tang explains that in order for a human being to attain great harmony with the universe, he needs to have ideals — the most important one being to strive to achieve peace in a process of remaining human.⁴⁰

We may also say that, just as Confucius had to face the chaotic situation of China during his time and redefined virtue, Chinese families should go back to the core of Confucian ethics and confront the situation lived by adolescent girls in a Chinese world that is becoming more and more detached from family-oriented values

³⁷Yijie Tang, "The Contemporary Significance of Confucianism," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 3, 4 (December 2008) 499.

³⁸Tang, "The Contemporary Significance of Confucianism," 500.

³⁹Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 290.

⁴⁰Yijie Tang, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2015, 86.

leading to promiscuity and abortion. The result should be a well-articulated approach adapted to the modern world. It is not by destroying the product of love that love may be furthered.

Supposing that the pregnancy was the result of rape and, no matter how many arguments may be given for the necessity of abortion, we cannot defend abortion as a means for bringing about harmony in the family. It may just be a legitimate procedure but not one that furthers other goods such as family harmony. The solution to the problem of unwanted pregnancy should be sought elsewhere. The virtue of ren (仁) or humanity, or again benevolence, calls family members to live in a humane way that seeks, not only a kind of disordered harmony which seeks good external appearance, but also one which strives to integrate the family dynamics with other members of the society at large. Without this integration, which has to be included, in a special way, in the case of a pregnancy there is a departure from the very meaning of the Confucian virtue of benevolence or humanity.

2.3. The Role of li (禮) or Ritual in the Process of Decision-Making

According to Fan, the Confucian concept of personhood involves actions because it is derived from and embedded in Confucian rites, based on relations because it is lived in a community of other human beings, and is degree-relevant because one can become more or less of a true human being.⁴¹ Li (禮) or rituals is the value that is central in the making of a Confucian human person. Without li (禮), as already mentioned above, not only can we not talk about humanity or benevolence but also we cannot have harmony. Ren (仁) or humanity or again benevolence is, according to Bretzke, the principle of inwardness whereas li (禮) is supposed to actualize this inward condition in order for the person to be engaged in the real world with real persons.⁴² All the activities or human interactions within a Confucian family have to be marked by specific rituals, which contribute to the shaping of the family and its members. One of the striking features of a Confucian family is the three bonds and five relationships.

As Bretzke tells us, the hallmark of the moral dimension of the five relationships is not just reason but also the affective component that

⁴¹Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, xix.

⁴²James T. Bretzke, "The Tao of Confucian Virtue Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 35, 137 (1995) 33.

guides all these relationships.⁴³ In the interplay of these relationships, there appears another Confucian value: respect or yi (義). According to Fan, a degree of respect is to be accorded to some individuals for their being more virtuous than others.⁴⁴ But the meaning of respect to the virtuous as understood within the Confucian family setting is very controversial in its impact on interpersonal relationships and interactions. I do not agree with Chuang who claims that an inferior's respect as compared to a superior's domineering attitude is more conducive to harmony and well-being within a family.⁴⁵ In fact, the very fact that, as she continues, intimacy/distance and superiority/inferiority are the two social dimensions that guide any assessment of one's relationship with others shows that with such prerequisites,⁴⁶ harmony is heavily undermined. This negative impact is especially manifest when a teenage girl comes with the consequence of a supposedly dishonourable act that not only endangers her survival within the society but also makes the family lose face.

What does this mean in terms of the process of decision-making? As we have seen above, the adolescent girl who finds herself pregnant faces the dilemma of meeting the expectations of the family that calls her for bearing a child only after a marriage sanctioned by the family. We have already seen that ren (仁) is the fundamental virtue in Confucian ethics. However, this virtue is, according to Fan, in a dialectically mutual contribution and complementation with li (禮) or ritual.⁴⁷ The meaning of this complementarity has led to a heated debate among neo-Confucians, who, according to Fan, were inclined to reduce the influence of ritual practices and overshadowing their place in the dynamics among the three virtues. From my standpoint, this complementarity is the reason why the adolescent girl will have to let go of what would have helped her face the reality of life with resolve and grow in maturity — accept and continue her pregnancy to term in order to preserve her relationship and avoid all other psychological suffering consecutive to a contrary decision. As a matter of fact, she will try to hide the confusion that reigns in her heart in order to show to her parents that she is well behaved and does not have any problem in life. The embryo in her

⁴³Bretzke, "The Tao of Confucian Virtue Ethics," 29.

⁴⁴Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 19.

⁴⁵Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 290.

⁴⁶Chuang, "Effects of Interaction Pattern on Family Harmony...", 274.

⁴⁷Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism*, 16.

womb is denied existence in order to accommodate family-held beliefs in a system of attitudes or ritual supposedly aimed at bringing harmony and well-being but failing in many ways.

3. Reconstruction of the Confucian Family's Interpersonal Dynamics: Framework for a Better Confucian Family Interaction: Back to the Virtues

While many families in China still believe that theirs is a conservative society guided by the ideals of Confucian family-based virtue ethics, the real life down the streets is something else. We will not discuss the political situation as related to the confusion between Confucian virtues and political practices. Our focus will be on how the young people live their sexual lives amidst the chaos of a cultural and moral shift that is being denied by the Chinese people. We have already mentioned the promiscuity that lurks behind the veils of premarital chastity. Women's low social status paired with the one-sided expectation of marital fidelity takes away from young women the power to negotiate safe sex.⁴⁸ Besides, there is also a whole new different direction that the government is taking to protect teenagers' sexual encounters. As a matter of fact, a recent study sponsored by a local government shows that the proper use of condoms can reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancy and other STDs.⁴⁹ The questionnaire also confirms that 10.7% of college students had pre-marital sex and most without a condom.⁵⁰

First of all, the government support shows that, at least at the national level, there are policies being implemented to prevent diseases and pregnancies among teenage girls but, at the same time, families do not do much to help educate their children. From my experiences in Mainland China and Taiwan, I realized that family cohesion is being undermined by parents' obligations while at work. The parents oftentimes leave for work early in the morning and come back only late night when the children are already sleeping. Therefore, children simply do not know parents because most of them finish high school without having lived much with them.

⁴⁸Chi-Yan Wong, and Catherine So-Kum Tang, "Understanding Heterosexual Chinese College Students' Intention to Adopt Safer Sex Behaviors," *The Journal of Sex Research* 38, 2 (May 2001) 120.

⁴⁹Zhihao Liu et al., "Determinants of Consistent Condom Use among College Students in China: Application of the Information-Motivation-Behavior Skills (IMB) Model," *Plos One* 9, 9 (September 2014) 6.

⁵⁰Liu et al., "Determinants of Consistent Condom Use...", 6.

Moreover, while in college, they live in dorms waiting to meet parents again during semester breaks. Because of these various reasons, the government role of education following the Information-Motivation-Behavior Skills (IMB) model presented in the research of Liu and associates is useful for informing young people on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, STDs and unplanned pregnancies.⁵¹ However, given that in the Confucian moral structure, education has to begin at home, not much should be expected from this model either. As a matter of fact, as more recent research done in Zhejiang province shows, even the IMB model has not been applied successfully because they found that the families and the government have for a long time left children to learn about sex from classmates and the internet.⁵² Fewer students who received some sort of education at school found it useless whereas most parents would not respond to sexually-oriented questions from children or would give confusing answers leading children not to ask such questions anymore.⁵³ We may also assume that, based on Confucian family structures, the failure of the family to educate their children in sexuality, plus the inequality in the family relationships is what led to the increase in pregnancies and abortions among teenage girls. Besides, given the taboo of speaking about sexuality, solutions still lie far away. There is need for the Chinese culture to reimagine ways to protect their Confucian tradition while at the same time facing frontally the challenges of the modern world. For the government, parents and schools to provide sex education only with the intention of curbing their children's surging sexual openness will not help.⁵⁴

The patient-family codetermination mode advocated by Li in his health-care ethics at the bedside, although it may delay treatment⁵⁵ is one that is close to the framework that we are advocating in this paper. This model will help open dialogue on particular issues like an unplanned pregnancy of an adolescent girl and may gradually not only educate her in virtue but also, most likely, she will end up choosing continuing pregnancy, thereby, reducing abortions and changing her sexual behaviour. Instead of remaining stuck in the

⁵¹Liu et al., "Determinants of Consistent Condom Use...", 6.

⁵²Yu Song, "The Sexuality Education and Attitudes of College Students in China," *Health Education* 115, 1 (January 2015) 99.

⁵³Song, "The Sexuality Education and Attitudes of College Students in China," 97.

⁵⁴Song, "The Sexuality Education and Attitudes of College Students in China," 99.

⁵⁵En-Chang Li et al., "Three Basic Modes for Patients' Clinical Decision-making in China," *Chinese Journal of Integrative Medicine* 20, 11 (November 2014) 879.

wrong understanding and practices of Confucianism, the parents should learn to adapt to the signs of the times. This finds echo in Rosemont's account on family and family values:

Temporal concerns can be said to permeate all successful family living, for they must enter into all deliberations we make in our role as parents in the discharge of our responsibilities to and for our children, deliberations not totally circumscribed by the ages of any of us, for I must think about the past, the present, and the future in ascertaining how to fulfill my role as a father to them, along with my wife as mother.⁵⁶

Following the recommendation of Li and associates after a study on medical decision-making in a Confucian family setting, since it does not conform to the changes in modern times, a new ethical view should be fashioned to protect individuals and families.⁵⁷ Only when we focus on the value of our acts will we truly come to a decision that will contribute to the fulfilment of our desires in a way that will make us grow maturely and responsibly toward ourselves as well as the society at large.⁵⁸ This statement supports also the idea that, when we talk about values in decisions, the human being behind the decision-making process occupies a very crucial role in the way society takes up a new shape or retains its original structural outlook. For the self, Dewey tells us that what lies at the core of the deliberation on values is the making up or the birth of a new person.⁵⁹ As the teenage girl faces the two possibilities of abortion or continuation of pregnancy, if she has been reared in a society that indeed values moral virtues like courage and practices it in a way that is not simply responding to external appearances or rituals, she will focus more on what she is supposed to become as a consequence of her decision. There will be more concern for the consequences of the act of abortion with regard to the self, to one's family, and subsequently to society as a whole — thereby growing in self-care.

Does not this suggestion sound like yet another consequentialist head-breaking attitude that the modern world — especially Chinese society — of instant solutions is not ready to welcome? The virtue

⁵⁶Henry Rosemont, *Philosophy and Cultural Identity: Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion*, London: Lexington Books, 2015, 130.

⁵⁷Li et al., "Three Basic Modes for Patients' Clinical Decision-making in China," 878.

⁵⁸Nancy Sherman, "The Virtues of Common Pursuit," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, 2 (June 1993) 278.

⁵⁹John Dewey, *Frontiers of Consciousness Series: Theory of the Moral Life*, New York: Irvington Publishers, 1996, 149.

education approach that we are presenting here does not mean that, for better results, people will act counting on the possible consequences but rather, as Shaw tells us, in accord with principles, procedures and motives.⁶⁰ While living out the different Confucian virtues, the families and individuals should make sure they account for possible and concrete consequences. Any single act or behaviour should be taken seriously since it will have implications on other patterns of life and will eventually define the individual we want to become before it defines whether we have attained family harmony or not. The individual will, as it were, be perceived in society through the lens of the most ultimate decisions that he makes. These may include how he educates his offspring, how much time and resources he puts aside for charity or other social interactions but, eventually, he will also have to face tougher decisions like whether to kill or save a life — to abort a child or warmly embrace God's gift of life. Dewey confirms this when he says that: "Where there is conduct there is not simply a succession of disconnected acts but each thing done carries forward an underlying tendency and intent, conducting, leading up, to further acts and to a final fulfilment or consummation."⁶¹

4. Conclusion

Even as they strive in the search for harmony, when individuals give importance to their behaviour, there will be an overall improvement in families and society because, through the good character of individuals, the other members of the community will learn from them, contributing to building a society of virtuous people — and as it were a harmonious Confucian society. Smith supports this hypothesis when he asserts that the search for our own happiness prompts or rather recommends to man the virtues of prudence, justice and beneficence that direct him to always aim at the happiness of others as well.⁶²

Here the others include also the unborn who may be crying for survival in the womb of this teenage girl considering abortion. This unborn may be classified among the marginalized of society and the voiceless who should find defenders among human rights advocacy groups and who, at this particular time and space, is calling for help

⁶⁰William Shaw, *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory: The Consequentialist Approach*, ed. James Dreier, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 13.

⁶¹Dewey, *Frontiers of Consciousness Series*, 11.

⁶²Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 309.

from the one who is responsible for his very existence. Therefore, the role of the pregnant teenage girl is very crucial in this process. She is the one who is the dwelling home for the innocent unborn, the fragile being who owes existence to her as the maiden chosen by the creator to bring it to life. In other words, there will be no more emphasis on one's own rights as has been the case for those who see abortion as a personal decision that mirrors a basic human right or as a solution to make room for some harmony or well being of the family as seen in Confucian families. Otherwise, as Abbott tells us: "If abortion can only be justified on those terms, with the images of the unborn as intruders upon our rights, then abortion does indeed lessen our own humanity."⁶³ If all teenage girls and young men in the Chinese culture grow up aware of this value of sacrifice, not only will the practice of abortion be eradicated, but also children who grow up in this kind of society will become future policy makers in the administration of a nation who will be capable of making ethically sound decisions and thereby participating in building a harmonious society meeting the Confucian ideals.

Therefore, instead of simply focusing on policies that aim at allowing women the right to abort fetuses, the Chinese government should also implement accompanying policies that aim at the education of virtues. It is when inner desires are fashioned according to the moral virtues that human beings will truly flourish. When desires for harmony are the only grounding lights for decision-making, the teenage girls will have lost the most important factor for mature choice — reflection and meditation. Aristotle echoes our point when he says that: "Individual deliberation is an interior monologue in which an inseparable mix of desire and intellect leads to choice."⁶⁴

The education in moral virtues through education at home and in schools appears, therefore, to be crucial. Unless children are taught to reflect logically, with emphasis on moral virtues, the future of a nation is at stake. Aside from education in schools, intra-societal interactions seem to be of tremendous importance as well because here is the most perfect platform for the practice of virtue and for learning how to lead a life in accord with norms and rules of one's own political family.⁶⁵ These interactions may be found in village-

⁶³Philip Abbott, "Philosophers and the Abortion Question," *Political Theory* 6, 3 (August 1978) 332.

⁶⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985, 1113a.

⁶⁵Anuradha Sindhvani, Rajeev Kumar, "Values in Higher Education: Need and Importance," *Educationia Confab* 2, 2 (February 2013) 12.

level health policy campaigns organized by public health officials and the training of campaigners at the local level. We may need, therefore, a completely new set of ideas to implement an overall policy that aims to bring to the fore the issue of abortion for a more sincere and responsible debate keeping in mind and taking into account the Confucian tradition.

Addressing the role of the individual, the thought of the consequences of bearing nine months of pregnancy, the future of a yet-unborn child or maybe the health of the mother are enough conditions to halt calm reflection. Therefore, the other more important factors such as the value of human life, the mystery of human living that eludes calculations and predictions are yet to be accounted for. However, these constitute the essence of the very existence of the embryo. It is very clear here that educating teenage girls in values such as responsibility is very important. The requirement to take responsibility in bearing with the demands of the yet-unborn child is also found in the conclusive argument of Lee and George:

So, the burden of carrying the baby, for all its distinctness, is significantly less than the harm the baby would suffer by being killed; the mother and father have a special responsibility to the child; it follows that intentional abortion (even in the few cases where the baby's death is an unintended but foreseen side effect) is unjust and therefore objectively immoral.⁶⁶

For a Confucian family-based ethics that claims its high value and wants to become universal, there is a need to reassess the tradition especially in order to bring in the teenage girl the capacity to value life rather than harmony and to provide each family member room for decision-making that is crucial for his/her life.

⁶⁶Patrick Lee and Robert P George, *Contemporary Debate in Applied Ethics: The Wrong of Abortion*, ed. Andrew I. Cohen and Christopher Heath Wellman, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 24.