

Yinyangism: Rethinking Western Dualism Regarding Sex and Gender

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Abstract

Much has been written in the West about sex and gender in the last one hundred years. It is perhaps to be expected that characteristic Western dualist approaches on this topic be quite different from the Chinese organic approach implied in *yin* and *yang*. Owing, evidently, to different socio-cultural worldviews, gender inequality, feminism and patriarchy are the subjects of very different definitions in the West and in China/Asia. Where the former underscores opposition between the genders' different realities and advocates for "diametric equality", the latter emphasises complementarity and is thus more predisposed to consider gender difference in what might be called "symbiotic inequality". Thus, it would be misleading to assume that researchers around the world readily accept Western paradigms regarding this issue. Using a sociological method, this essay aims to establish that concepts like patriarchy and feminism are not subject to unanimous presumptions based on Western models, and are therefore not practical concepts with which to design universal analytical processes or to create a dominant ethos. It further proposes the introduction of "yinyangism" as a new, more apt conceptual framework that will consider the male-female relation as a complementary one. The aim is to have yinyangism studied as a more productive stage in the evolution of sex and gender discourse, one whereby the natural differences between the male and the female will be recognised not in adversarial terms, but complementary ones. The resulting social environment will be one where individuals of different genders are not necessarily expected to perform the same objective functions in society, but rather have their mutual inequality act as a reservoir of differentiated skills that complement each other in different ways and actually produce a "mutual" or "symbiotic" equality.

Keywords: feminism, gender inequality, patriarchy, politics, yin-and-yang

The Worldview on Gender Equality and Inequality

Any statement that men and women are naturally unequal and that it is a misconception to think that they can be categorically homologous will receive virulent chastisement in the present political environment. Such an assertion will be considered a vestige of a patriarchal past that society must resolutely continue to reject. However, while this modern viewpoint is attractive for seeking better structures of fairness between males and females, gender equality must be properly understood rather than misconceived. In short, the simplistic deployment of Western adversarial ideologies that propose the inexistence of difference needs to be questioned, and the Asian, yin-yang version of “inequality” needs to be arbitrated as a credible tool of analysis and not dismissed as a value judgment on women’s inferiority.

If one were to view the gender equality issue through the magnifying glass of the yin and yang principle, equality would not issue from sameness, but from the recognition of an essential *difference* and the deployment of analytical processes that would defend and rationalise the need for meaningful social environments that promote complementarity. This worldview contains certain principles that upend misconceptions that have dominated public discourse for the last hundred years and now require rethinking.

The trend nowadays is to consider sameness (in quality or quantity) as equality, while difference (in quality or quantity) as inequality, so male and female will only be considered equals when their fundamental attributes are regarded as identical. But the elephant in the room is that the male is different from the female, whether viewed from a biological or a psychological perspective. This should not be taken as a suggestion that access to certain social, economic or political spheres should be denied to one gender or the other. On the contrary: because each gender lacks something in relation to the other, it makes complementarity possible in *all* spheres of human endeavour, since each can supply what the other lacks. In yin and yang, it is precisely in these mutual differences and complementarity that their equality lies. In other words, male and female are different and thus “unequal” in relation to the other: the male is unequal to the female just as the female is unequal to the male. Their true equality stems from shared differences and consequent complementarity rather than from any sameness. A very concrete image of the impossibility of standardising the genders is the existence of men’s sports leagues and even chess tournaments separate from women’s competitions. Furthermore, transgender individuals that began life as men and are now women are commonly prohibited from competing in women’s competitions because of “unfair advantage”. Women athletes consistently have complained quite bitterly about rules that allow transgender women to compete in women’s sports (Spitznagel, 2021, n.p.).

So, the complete picture is rather that female is unequal to male in some respects just as male is unequal to female in other respects: yin and yang. Realistically, it is only against this obvious background of lacks and properties that equality and complementarity can exist. In the West, this is undoubtedly an unexplored framework in gender discourse, one that would provide a fresh socio-cultural worldview; it applies to both heterosexual (cisgender and transgender) and homosexual contexts.

In our modern world, feminism and allied movements, buoyed by massive funds and devoted foot soldiers, have deployed considerable resources and strategies to bring male and female to a compulsory parity. The LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) movement (which now includes “gender fluid” designations and some yet-to-be-

coined “identities”) has also joined the fray to demand that “equality” should also be extended to all the genders and identities it can contrive.

The concepts of feminism and patriarchy, as understood today, do not give a comprehensive, unbiased picture of the best ways to understand gender relations. A major problem is that the ideology that structures them introduced an acrimonious vocabulary of *progressive* vs. *reactionary*, a lexicon that represents an implied vertical value judgment that underpins the choice between the progression to a more moral society and the regression to a past devoid of basic rights for women. But reality is multidimensional in character, much too complicated to be assessed with absolute polar opposites in order to have the desired viewpoint occupy ethically favourable positions.

“Yinyangism” (a neologism derived from the “yin” and “yang” of ancient Chinese philosophy) holds that the male is unequal to the female in some respects just as the female is unequal to the male in other respects and that there are complementary differences rather than sameness; it is in this interdependence that their equality and complementarity lie. This insightful approach is not found in the current discourse on patriarchy and feminism. “Yinyangism” is in line with the vision of complementarity indicated in a 2018 report by Oxfam, “Reward Work, Not Wealth” (p. 13), which states that “it will not be enough to integrate women further into existing economic structures. We must define a vision for a new human economy, one that is created by women and men together, for the benefit of everyone and not just a privileged few”.

Understanding Feminism, Gender Equality and Gender Inclusiveness

Public debates on feminism, gender equality and gender inclusiveness have proliferated in the last 50 years. Some of these brought some clarity to the discourse while others befuddled it. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) declared in a document in 2012 (no. 1, p. 2) that, “Gender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative, it is about fairness and equity, and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions”. Oxfam’s “Reward Work, Not Wealth” (p. 12) reported in 2018 that the average woman in the United States is said to earn 70-80 cents for every dollar earned by a man on the same job. It added that men are paid more than women counterparts and are concentrated in higher paid, higher status jobs whereas women are over-represented in low income and least secure jobs often as a result of socio-cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs.

Jacobsen highlights the problem of socio-economic inequalities when he points out that,

It is also the case that at many times there have been formal restrictions against women’s full participation in paid employment, including work hours regulations (quite common from the turn of the 20th century up through the 1920s and 1930s), marriage bars (requiring women to resign when they married) and banning of women from certain industries and occupations (often because they were banned from receiving the necessary training, such as bans on women’s entering law school). (2011, p. 8)

This perspective was recently underscored by a scandal that broke out in Japan in August 2018. Authorities at Tokyo Medical University were manipulating entrance examination results since 2006 to favour men and reduce female population on the grounds that men are more available for medical practice than women who might resign after childbirth. This reinforces the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) view (2012, p. 5, no. 23) that

irrespective of family commitments, many female professionals find it difficult to climb the career ladder. In fact, inequalities increase the higher up the pay scale you go, so that while on average in OECD countries women earn 16% less than men, female top-earners are paid on average 21% less than their male counterparts. This suggests the presence of a so-called ‘glass ceiling’. Women are also disadvantaged when it comes to decision-making responsibilities and senior management positions; by the time you get to the boardroom, there are only 10 women for every 100 men.

Significant efforts have been made to correct the errors of patriarchy. Jacobsen (2011, pp. 1–2) notes that the nineteenth century recorded the rise of the women’s suffrage movement and campaign for equal treatment of women and men under the law in Western countries. In 1893, New Zealand became the first country to give voting rights to women while many other countries followed suit in the first part of the twentieth century: Denmark in 1915, the United States in 1920, Liechtenstein in 1984 and Kuwait in 2005. However, many other forms of legal discrimination against women still persisted until the United States passed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal to pay women and men different wages for equal work. Some other countries followed suit much later: Ireland in 1976 and Japan in 1987.

Posadas et al. (2017, p. xiii), who maintain that tackling gender inequalities requires a comprehensive approach (bearing in mind that it is worse among rural women and girls and among minority groups), say that,

The past 50 years have seen marked improvement in the lives of girls and women around the world. Across the globe, more girls and women are educated than ever before, more girls are in school than boys, and women make up nearly half of the global labour force.

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that while programs for gender equality focus on the female condition and advance their interests, this sometimes negatively impacts the male condition. The United Nations (2013, p. 182) points out in “Humanity Divided: Confronting Inequality in Developing Countries”, that

we observe worrying gender reversals in some countries, with males’ average years of education and secondary enrolment rates now falling below that of females. There has been little systematic global analysis of the causes for this. To understand this phenomenon, a shift in analysis from women’s to men’s behaviour is more necessary than ever. In particular, it requires an investigation of norms of masculinity and their response to changes in women’s outcomes.

Furthermore, there is an unresolved debate in feminist discourse whether “equality” and “equity” are synonymous or is “equality” the giving of equal treatment to everyone whereas “equity” is giving proportional – and hence, different – treatment according to relative circumstances.

Just as yinyangism goes well beyond proportional distribution and quotas (and thus not synonymous with “equity”), even the use of quotas may not have a clear outcome as indicated in a report (no. 23) by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012, p. 5): “The Norwegian experience shows that quotas can be effective in improving the gender balance at board level. However, the overall economic consequences of mandating quotas have yet to become clear”.

In addition to recent contributions from Davos 2019, Oxfam's "Reward Work, Not Wealth", (2018, p. 10) which connects economic gender inequalities with global economic inequalities, points out that,

There are now 2,043 dollar billionaires worldwide. Nine out of 10 are men [...] While billionaires in one year saw their fortunes grow by \$762bn, women provide \$10 trillion in unpaid care annually to support the global economy [...] The richest 1% continue to own more wealth than the whole of the rest of humanity [...] In Nigeria, the richest man earns enough interest on his wealth in one year to lift two million people out of extreme poverty [...] In Indonesia, the four richest men own more wealth than the bottom 100 million people. The three richest people in the US own the same wealth as the bottom half of the US population (roughly 160 million people). In Brazil, someone earning the minimum wage would have to work 19 years to make the same amount as a person in the richest 0.1% of the population makes in one month.

Gender inequalities existing in different forms around the world have been targeted by certain policies and movements for gender equality. This includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and African Union's "Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa" in 2004 (art. 5) which pledges to "Expand and promote the gender parity principle" both nationally and continentally. In the documents, *Gender Equality and Sustainable Development* (2014) and *Gender Equality as an Accelerator for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals* (2018), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women strongly argues for equal integration of women in socio-economic dynamics.

As Jacobsen (2011, p. 1) notes, gender inequality is seen across the world while for others like Jayachandran (2015), it is more visible in developing countries. Verloo and Lombardo (2007, pp. 23-24) identify three major viewpoints about gender equality: (i) achieving sameness; (ii) affirmation of difference from the male norm; (iii) transformation of all established norms and standards of what it means to be male or female. For them, the way forward to gender equality as sameness is to include women in socio-political dynamics without undermining existing male norms so men and women can have equal rights, opportunities and privileges. This approach is criticized for not directly challenging patriarchy. For equality as difference, the female is placed at par with the male and patriarchy is directly challenged, but it goes a step further to be biased in favour of women. For equality as transformation, modern society itself is brought under scrutiny and the proposed solution is to deconstruct all political structures and discourses and welcome multiculturalism and gender mainstreaming.

About divergences in approach, Jacobsen (2011, pp. 5–6) brings to the fore "the standard question of whether to focus on gender equality in outcomes or in opportunities". The difference here is that a society where economic outcomes are equal is one in which women and men participate equally across all sectors of economic activity, whether paid or unpaid, and make same salaries, whereas a society where opportunities are based on choice has men and women receiving same amount of education and training but at liberty to decide what careers they will go for, each of which has its own salary structure. In this latter scenario, one can then find more women going for certain professions than men, and vice versa, or "choosing to spend more time in household production rather than in paid work, and thus ending up with different average earnings than men". Thus, differences in economic status do not always originate in gender discrimination.

While for Makaliu, as Ogwude (2013, p. 278) notes, patriarchy “is the social system in which the role of the male is the primary and the *locus* of social structure, makes objects of women as property to be possessed, for the economic, sexual and social stability of the man”, feminism arose in reaction to injustices in patriarchy. For Fiss (1994, p. 413), “Feminism is the set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve greater equality for women. As its governing ideology, feminism gives shape and direction to the women’s movement and, of course, is shaped by it”. Feminism’s broader scope today includes female self-affirmation, abortion rights, the LGBTQIA movement, divorce, single parenting, and even liberal politics.

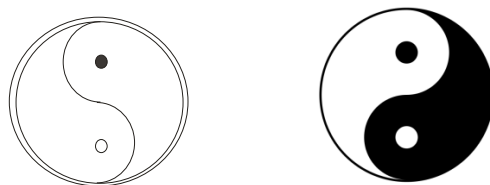
Feminist consciousness, which has male sympathizers, did manifest in some forms in all cultures from ancient times, but its modern form is rightly credited to the West. Feminism set a high premium on gender parity but has various schools of thought and different levels of commitment. Some core viewpoints still run through all feminisms as can be seen in the writings of influential feminists like Elizabeth Johnson, Simone de Beauvoir, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, S. Dalton, Bressler, Gill Plain, Susan Sellers, George Eliot and Margaret Fuller. Some critics consider feminism a shape-shifting and self-conflicted ideology. One might see a female politician ask people to vote for her *because she is a woman* but protest when people treat her *as a woman*. As Verloo and Lombardo (2007, p. 22) underscore, gender equality is a contested notion and open to all manner of interpretations.

Social Implications of Yin and Yang

Ancient Chinese *yin and yang* is a theoretical framework of dualism and complementarity that deserves a closer study, as its implications for gender discourse are evident.

Figure 1

Symbols of Yin and Yang



Yin and yang is a worldview of dualist complementarity, unlike its Western counterpart which is a worldview of hostile polarity (opposites in conflict/rivalry). Feminist discourse, especially in its most radical manifestations, shows a Western proclivity towards polarisation, fashioning a rhetoric that envisions mutually exclusive groups with circumscribed likeminded members that are externally hostile to the other group which, by its very nature, is inimical to its interests. Yinyangism, by contrast, assumes that the overall patterns of relations among human beings is too scopicous to be subjected to such narrow analyses.

Yinyangism underscores the fact that male and female are not “same”, but are different and complementary, rather than opposites in conflict, involved in a historical rivalry. This is a social paradigm that can be valid across different societies. It also applies to proportional relations (less than, equal to, greater than) between male and female in respect to social positions, jobs and opportunities.

In yinyangism, female is not the opposite of male if the word “opposite” includes “conflict.” Female and male are rather different complements co-existing within the same social reality. Gender equality is not equality stemming from sameness – sameness is a pipe-dream – but from the realisation that difference makes complementarity and real equality possible. Therein, each gender celebrates differences as a beneficial aspect of nature.

Gender equality understood as sameness is a battle feminism can win in the short term, but it must lose the war in the long term for obvious reasons. There are pockets of rational resistance that understand that feminism that is polarising will not prove itself as the best alternative to create a just equality. Yinyangism reveals a critical problem inherent in polarisation: it tends to energise *both* opponents. As critics like Ridgeway (1997, p. 218) point out, even when feminism seems to be winning, it is only because patriarchy is re-aligning to reassert itself in other forms.

In essence, yinyangism is about being for the other, about making the other whole so that one can be whole. Social progress requires mutual interconnections. In this regard, the woman is the strength of the man where he is weak just as the man is the strength of the woman where she is weak. This is where equality and social progress lie.

It is known that the degree of polarisation in societies correlates with an increase in social injustice. There is a growing number of researchers that analyse what is called the “reversal of the gender gap”, in education and other social spheres. As the focus on educating women has increased, women now significantly outnumber men in college classes and in the number of degrees earned (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, pp. 1–2). Men are, essentially, “dropping out”. The reasons for this are not yet clear, but the corresponding opposite trends cannot be a coincidence. It seems that humanity can use a different model for gender relations, not a bipolar one that institutionalises new-fangled injustices. Moreover, feminist polarisation with its discourses against patriarchy is very likely contributing to the disappearance of the family as it has been understood for centuries. This link and its social upshot are still to be properly studied, although many women writers like Venker and Schlafly (2011) offer coherent analyses and rational support of family, defending it against the onslaught of radical feminism.

Conclusion

Neither the defenders of patriarchy nor feminism offer a comprehensive, realistic and sustainable framework for future gender discourses and relationships. Yinyangism could be a new and powerful worldview that recognises the many benefits of a complementary relationship between the sexes. Within this principle, equality stems from mutually shared differences and complementarity rather than from obligatory sameness and artificial rivalries. Perhaps we have a moral obligation to consider yinyangism as a compelling alternative.

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