

Confucianism, Moral Education, and the Harmonious Development of Persons

Lina Zhang (□黎娜)

HuBei University of Science and Technology

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was a great thinker, educator, and center of philosophical gravity for the progressive development of the Ru (儒) school of thought in ancient China. He is also recognized as a major contributor to the world's wisdom traditions. It is not a stretch to suggest that Confucian thinking about education can be considered a touchstone for the entire dynamic of classical Chinese culture.

While the *Lunyu* (论语), “Gathered Sayings of Confucius and his Disciples,” or the *Analects*, was compiled in its present form during the Han dynasty, its subject matter deals with the life and teachings of Confucius and some of his closest entourage in their educational projects and political adventures. Perhaps though it wasn't until the Song dynasty (9–11) when Zhao Pu, a prime minister, established the *Analects of Confucius* as the most revered classical Confucian work.

Because it supposedly recorded Confucius' living thoughts, words and actions, it would make sense that a newly re-emergent Confucian educational and political ideology would promote this text to get a clear idea about the “teacher of ten-thousand generations” (*wanshizhi shi* 万世之师). Prime Minister Zhao argued that it was—and is—a treasured text for

self-cultivation, management of family affairs, government of the state, and keeping of the world in peace and harmony—the basic project of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*, 大学) another central text that would soon become canonized in the Four Books. And throughout Chinese history and today, it has been read as such a practical, we might even say *pragmatic*, philosophical text.

As we now can approach it, the *Analects* is a most representative book of Confucianism, as it best accumulates the thinking of Confucius—especially with regards to his teaching methods, and his approach to public affairs in a life of educating. Those who endeavor to read it in its entirety in a linear fashion might feel that it has no tight logical coherence, while others will detect a subtle interrelationship between parallel passages of text that deal with evocative philosophical conceptual clusters regarding personal development, education, social harmony, and cosmic flourishing. In any event, the *Analects* has been deeply loved and revered by people of insight throughout the world for more than two thousand years.

As the foundational text of Confucianism, the *Analects* were first introduced into Korea and Vietnam as early as between the Qin and Han dynasties (roughly 200 BCE). Since the 16th century, it has gradually spread to the West and has been published across Europe and America. The *Analects* can therefore be called a precious treasure in the treasury of world cultures, its splendors enduring to the present day.

What is the text's practical meaning to our contemporary life and society? What attitude does the *Analects* want to transmit? What is the ideal plane for a cultivated person? These questions are worthy of attention by both scholars and policy-makers. Therefore, this paper will attempt to “arouse a new vision” of these questions in the context of modern social relations in a quickly-evolving China.

The Harmonious Development of Person: The Great Unity of Heaven and Man (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一)

The conception of the “Great Unity of Heaven and Man” originates from the Daoist school of thought originating during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BCE) and was subsequently taken up and developed by Confucian thinkers as well. It represents a key part of classical Chinese culture.

In the Daoist view, heaven [*tian*] and man are both part of nature, being intimately connected with each other in all kinds of essential ways. Heaven represents a law and ethical truth of nature; therefore, the ideal ways of the world should therefore conform to these commands of heaven (*tianming* 天命). This existential unity is supposed to be natural and spontaneous. So, Confucius said, “Exemplary persons hold three things in awe: the propensities of *tian* [heaven], persons in high station, and the words of the sages. Petty persons, knowing nothing of the propensities of *tian* [heaven], do not hold it in awe; they are unduly familiar with person in high station, and ridicule the words of the sages.”¹

In this way, Confucius first explores the laws and truths of heaven, noting that the sage will obey and behave accordingly, manifesting kindheartedness, justice, morality, etiquette, credibility and integrity. This is the path of self-cultivation. By aligning one's self with heaven's

commands, the ideal state of unity of person and heaven is achieved.

The *Analects* advertises the importance of integrating oneself with natural and social normative patterns and promotes internalizing heaven's mandate into the heart-mind of persons. This is Confucian “way-making” (*dao* 道) that integrates heaven, earth, and the person into a perfect unity. The moral strength thus obtained is astonishing, in that a person can resolutely face any obstacle, in any context.

Confucius' views on education can be summed up via a correct understanding of this ideal of the “Great Unity of Heaven and Man.” The morality of the people is given by heaven, so the right relationship of heaven and man is one of harmony. However, people can be deceived by fame, wealth and other egotistical pursuits, thereby losing their vital principles of morality. Therefore, the aim of cultivating their characters is to get rid of self-deceit and selfish desire for the external world, and identify more with an internalized spiritual world of ancestral veneration and cultural inheritance—viz. “heaven” (*tian* 天).

So, Confucius said, “From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* [heaven]; from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries.”² In the end, he enjoyed doing the things that he preferred without caring about others because he had finally reconciled himself to the mandate of heaven.

This passage exemplifies the significance of harmony (*he* 和) as an ideal achieved through self-cultivation. The ultimate achievement of personal self-cultivation is the realization of sagehood. How to become a sage? This is a dif-

¹ *Analects* 16.8. All quotations from the *Analects* are taken from: Roger T. Ames, and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998).

² *Analects* 2.4.

difficult question to address on an abstract conceptual level, but in the context of Confucian practices of self-cultivation it is the ultimate educational aim.

We can at least be sure that a sage is a person who should pursue personal and communal flourishing (*le* 樂) without concern for either poverty or wealth. The key to the happy life is complete freedom of heart and ease of spirit. It is a deep state of heart-mind satisfaction.

Education and Harmonious Development

Harmonious development primarily refers to a harmonious relationship between people and nature.

Today, the pollution of air, water, and land has threatened people's living conditions. Non-renewable energy and mineral resources are almost exhausted, and our lives are becoming increasingly precarious. Harmonious development between nature and people presupposes a deep consensus or mutual accommodation. The human being as a living being obeys and understands the basic natural laws and, in this way, seeks to live and grow sustainably.

In Confucian thought, the human being is the most important living being in nature. To some degree, a person's development is also a part of nature's movement. Comparatively speaking, a person's physical life has its own special laws, and these laws are in accord with the basic laws of nature: fetal development, birth, childhood, growing old, and death. These are not only stages of life's narrative, but also part of the natural order as ineluctable biological processes.

How then can we achieve a harmonious development between persons and nature?

Confucian education as self-cultivation is a medium that connects people with nature. It

not only can help people understand the general laws of physiology and psychology, but can also recognize the need for special accommodations due to unique needs. A person's psychological and physical nature will vary due to periodicity, sequentiality, individuality, and imbalance. From this angle, vital education requires that we study and adapt ourselves so as to optimize a student's potential for comprehensive development.

We might assert with confidence that an important task for educators in this century is assimilating the best of Confucian views on the harmonious development of persons and nature in a lifelong process of learning for one's self (*wei ji zhi xue* 為己之學). It should also be noted that harmonious development also refers to a non-coercive order between individual values and the interests of society. Our current social life is mainly determined by economic, cultural, political, and scientific discursive formations. Wealth and esteemed social status are what everyone seemingly desires.

Confucius did not object to any of this—they are all achievable within heaven's mandate. But he did say that an exemplary person should obtain these things only in a proper way—that is, a way in accord with the commands of heaven.

Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequence of deviating from the way, I would have no part in them. Poverty and disgrace are what people deplore, but if they are the consequence of staying on the way, I would not avoid them. Wherein do the exemplary persons who would abandon their authoritative conduct warrant that name? Exemplary persons do not take leave of their authoritative conduct even for the space of a meal. When they are

troubled, they certainly turn to it, as they do in facing difficulties.³

Harmonious Development is Incompatible with Certain Trends in Contemporary Chinese Compulsory Education

The aims of education as the development of a child's cognitive and non-cognitive capacities as a kind of comprehensive empowering for future growth might feasibly be agreed upon in both Eastern and Western cultural paradigms. However, with the rapid transitioning in political, cultural, and economic fields in Chinese society, conflicts and contradictions with such an educational ideal are ubiquitous.

These contradictions can be represented by the fetishization of the standardized test score—whether to admit students to university or as a way to understand the progress of a student's learning. To that end, social scientists have theorized the existence of an exam orientation, one that perniciously affects the values at the very heart of the Chinese educational system and its origins in Confucian traditions.

In the last decade, an exam orientation has been on the rise as the official Chinese assessment system has become increasingly reductionistic and distorted—ignoring the comprehensive development of students and their aspirations to become holistically integrated persons in their families and in society. The standard exam is fetishized as a kind of magic device, wherein the supposedly meritorious selection of the most talented and worthy people can be achieved from a large student population. Such testing practices and culture is seemingly supported by the entire society, although there is

some reluctance and resistance to such a rigid system.

What, then, is the proper scope of the exam? How to use the ways of the exam?

Social scientists have turned to theories of curriculum reform. Scholars such as Mingyuan Gu, President of the College of Education and Management in Beijing Normal University, and Qiquan Zhong, Lifetime Professor of East China Normal University, have pointed out that a person is a complete and comprehensive unit, including both cognitive and non-cognitive factors. And, they argue, the non-cognitive factors are the key for promoting the success of the person.

Classroom teaching in an age of compulsory schooling must be distinguished from traditional Chinese educational culture—as represented by the Confucian legacy. In China, as in the rest of the world, classroom teaching is too often devoted to memorization, and the function of the teacher is to transmit content to students. Students are expected to passively accept this information. Studying is thereby substituted for learning.

Therefore, a new movement for curriculum reform is needed to aim at making processes of active learning and interactive dialogue more central to teaching practices. In other words, teachers should be aiming to help students learn how to dialogue with the objective world through active and collaborative social inquiry. In this way, it can be formed to a style of learning that stresses activeness, cooperation, and profound contemplation. Such comprehensive pedagogy would highlight the practical aspects of learning within any overarching theory or framework of knowledge. Any narrowing of interests or over-emphasis upon teaching content for standardized testing damages the harmonious development of students and forecloses possibilities for self-realization within

³ *Analects* 4.5.

society—this is what John Dewey meant by “individuality.”⁴

Nowadays, the present situation of Chinese education is one of anxiety. The main cause is that the student assessment system is too narrow and limited, the achievement within any subject is only dependent on the score rather than the cumulative processes and personal experiences that led to it. And little regard is given towards students’ feelings and the enjoyment of the subjects themselves. Moral imagination and intellectual creativity are smothered as students are forced to adjust themselves to this compulsory model. Teachers care more about the score. In this way, education has become the machine of the exam. It corrodes the ability of independent acting and thinking, and the original aim of developing the student now runs in the opposite direction.

Confucius said, “I do not open the way for students who are not driven with eagerness; I do not supply a vocabulary for students who are not trying desperately to find the language for their ideas. If on showing students one corner they do not come back to me with the other three, I will not repeat myself.”⁵ Teachers should focus on encouraging optimal relationships between students, subject-matter, and teaching methods, rather than on merely economic interests and the maximization of quantitative test scores.

If such reforms are not carried out, the quality of teaching will continue to degrade as teachers more easily adopt extreme ways of treating students, such as corporal and psychological punishments that are more and more common in the schools. At present, schools are persisting within an atmosphere of cold indif-

ference to student well-being or, even worse, carrying out acts of violence. Such practices as a tragic parody or empty shell of educational values have very adverse consequences for mental health and societal well-being, but we don't need utilitarian reasons for rejecting such compulsory pedagogy.

If we focus emphasis on knowledge itself rather than its potential value, the harmonious development of the student is only a dream. Comprehensive development is the basic aim of education. However, even the elementary school has become pre-occupied with standard examinations, disregarding the comprehensive development of students and paying little attention to, and sometimes even canceling, subjects like gym, art, music, and morality in order to pursue higher enrollment rates (which come as a result of achieving higher test scores). Some have even advocated that subject matter must be brought into correspondence with the exam, causing schools to arbitrarily cancel subjects which are not directly part of the exams.

Too many teachers agree that subject-matter should be memorized mechanically rather than understood so as to expand the vision of knowledge; consequently, we risk narrowing and stunting the range of knowledge and the sense of culture of students. As Confucius said, “Learning without due reflection leads to perplexity; reflection without learning leads to perilous circumstances.”⁶

In this rigid process of learning, some students have become so frightened of examinations that they have lost their interest in learning—having been forced to stay in the classroom for a long time, putting up a desperate fight with the score. Confucius, a teacher for ten-thousand generations (*wanshi zhi shi* 萬世之師) would not approve, and neither should we.

⁴ See John Dewey, *Individualism: Old and New*, in Jo Ann Boydston (Ed.), *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, 1882-1953, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), Later Works, volume 5.

⁵ *Analects*, 7.8.

⁶ *Analects*, 2.15.

Harmonious Development of Persons and Cultural Continuity in China

The culture of China has long upheld the harmonious development of the person—harmony (*he* 和) being a keynote of Chinese classical culture.

Peace is a foundational aim of every moral development in the cosmos; all things exist in a creative unity of opposites. Peace and cooperation are the essence of moral culture. As Master You said in *The Analects*, “Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety. In the ways of the Former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small.”⁷ Chinese classical culture advocates peace, working together with one heart, and absorbing anything that is good for a person.

Harmonious development is an educational aim wherein we integrate the emergent development of the person within the emergent order of society. It is the unity of an emergent self. In China, more scholars are coming to recognize the shortcomings of a merely exam-oriented education. They emphasize that Chinese education must develop students’ capabilities as part of a comprehensive education for holistic development. Concretely speaking, this education must focus on self-cultivation through the external and internal development of the person.

A revitalized reform movement in Chinese education for a more holistic development of persons can find ample resources in classical Confucian notions of harmonious development and self-cultivation. In other words, by paying more attention to social diversity and individu-

ality as an emergent achievement of vitally appreciating social relationships, we are working in a Confucian tradition that seeks to optimize interpersonal experience by seeking common ground while reserving difference—or “harmony without conformity” (*he er bu tong* 和而不同).

Lina Zhang (黎娜) was born in China’s Hubei Province. She received her B.A. (2004) and M.A. (2007) in English Language Education from Central China Normal University in Wuban. After graduation, she was an Assistant Professor in the College of Education in Tong Ren University (Guizhou Province), before later joining the faculty at Hu Bei Science and Technology University in 2013 as an Assistant Professor in the College of Education. She teaches courses about the Pedagogy of Preschool Education, Survey Research Methods in Education, Management of Preschool Education, and Education Policy. She also supervises undergraduate students in their practical fieldwork. She has published over ten articles, a book, and maintains three research projects in Hu Bei Science and Technology University. She wishes to acknowledge HuBei Provincial Education Science Planning Project (2015GB123).

⁷ *Analects*, 1.12.