

## ABSTRACT

The general trend in education in Hong Kong as in many others parts of the world is specialization and the rational-scientific approach. While this favors abundant data gathering, technical skills development, and competitiveness, it nonetheless has adverse consequences, such as a limited vision of reality and unbalanced personal development. In *The Will to Meaning*, Viktor Frankl describes this dilemma as “exchanging the forest of truth for the trees of facts”. This paper discusses the tenets of Confucian education – at once moral, holistic, and humanistic – and how its recourse to classic literature could be at least part of the answer to the woes of higher learning today.

### **Confucius Said, “*Read Classic Literature*”** On Education and the Importance of Cultural Reading

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Agnes Ng (Lingnan University, HK); Denise Tang (Polytechnic University, HK); Christine Cheung (University of Science and Technology, HK); Rina Camus (National Chengchi University, Taiwan)

## INTRODUCTION

*The general aim of education is obviously to train the whole man – the intellect and the will, not just the mind alone. Knowledge is in the intellect or mind; character is in the will or our decision...Education should not only perfect the mind but also build character. Education today gives little attention to the latter....Education should maintain 3 goals in the training of the intellect: to train it in the way of truth, to correlate subjects with one another, (and) to emphasize depth, rather than froth.*

- Fulton Sheen

Traditionally, higher levels of education, particularly what we receive in our university years, involve not only knowledge and skills acquisition but also values formation and progress in a person's search for truth and meaning. Unfortunately, the common trend in universities nowadays is a rational-scientific approach that puts emphasis on technical skills. While specialization is a factor to development, it nonetheless has unfavorable consequences in the learning process, such as neglect of moral instruction and the loss of a holistic view.<sup>1</sup> In line with this, success is often understood in terms of prosperity and material well-being so that lucrative income becomes the most important criteria for deciding a career path. Unsurprisingly, unscrupulous business dealings may be tolerated even among the highly-educated, and inequitable practices in the financial world abound, triggering economic crises time and again.

Meanwhile, the trend in specialization has also led to a lack of appreciation for the humanities – such as history, art, philosophy and literature – because they are regarded as unprofitable and impractical, irrelevant to success. Because of this, young adults finish school without acquiring sufficient knowledge and appreciation of their rich cultural heritage and the timeless values contained in classic works.

The authors of this paper feel that the adverse effects of modern education described above – the loss of a holistic view, the want of moral instruction, and the distancing from the cultural achievements of our past – predominate education in Hong Kong as in many parts of the world. The

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<sup>1</sup> “We must consider the effects of scientific specialization (...) The challenge is how to attain, how to maintain, how to retain a unified concept of man in the face of scattered data, facts and findings supplied by a compartmentalized science of man”, see Frankl (1988, p.20).

aim of this paper is to re-discover the wisdom behind Confucian education. Our premise is that the ancient Confucian school – humanistic, holistic and morally-oriented like the Greek *paideia* – taught principles and practices of education that are relevant today and can shed light on how to improve university education in Hong Kong so that it can more truly dispose young minds to *knowledge without limits*.

## 1. NATURE OF CONFUCIAN EDUCATION

Confucius (551-479 BC) was born in what is presently Shandong Province in China. He is fondly called China's great teacher of all times, having been the first to make education accessible to all.<sup>2</sup> Until his time, the term "gentleman" (*Chun Tzu*, 君子) strictly applied to those of aristocratic birth. Confucius, however, taught that being a gentleman, that is, an ideal person, was not a matter of social standing but of good education and moral uprightness. Throughout his life, he instructed countless persons, young and old, commoners and nobles, private individuals as well as public authorities, to teach what he believed to be the key to moral, social and political reform. After his death, his followers compiled his sayings and significant events of his life into the book now known as the *Analects* (Lun Yu, 論語).

Confucius is widely regarded as China's single-most important and influential thinker, having dedicated himself relentlessly to education and political reform based on a virtue-oriented moral philosophy anchored on the key ideas of Heaven (*Tien*, 天) and the Way (*Tao*, 道), or will of Heaven. In the course of the centuries, the school that he established (*Ru Jia*, 儒家) became the ethical, social and cultural foundation of Chinese society as well as the entire East Asian region. In this section, we will outline the principal elements of Confucian education, namely its *emphasis on*

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<sup>2</sup> "The Master said, From the very poor upwards – beginning with the man who could be no better present than a bundle of dried (meat) – none has ever come to me without receiving instruction", *Analects*, VII.7. All passages from the *Analects* in this paper are taken from Arthur Waley's translation, cf. Waley (1989).

*morals* and character-building, the importance of *students' disposition to learn*, and its *holistic-humanistic approach*. In the process, we will also mention our findings about common attitudes towards learning which will reveal the importance and urgency of applying Confucian ideas to education, particularly in a Chinese society like Hong Kong.

### *1.1 Emphasis on Moral Growth*

As previously mentioned, the present trend in education tends to neglect moral development. This is lamentable considering that young people are the building blocks of society. When purely material goals are set without a morally sound mindset, dishonest means could be used to achieve goals, thus unsettling social order and harmony. Confucius lived through a period of social decline and political chaos.<sup>3</sup> All around him, he witnessed corruption of power and destitution. It was hence with a great sense of urgency that he taught the practice of virtues such as sincerity, benevolence, courage and prudence as the solution to the evils of his time:

A faultless man I cannot ever hope to meet; the most I can hope for is to meet a man of fixed principles. Yet where all around I see Nothing pretending to be Something, Emptiness pretending to be Fullness, Penury pretending to be Affluence, even a man of fixed principles will be none too easy to find. (VII.24)

The Master took four subjects for his teaching: culture, conduct of affairs, loyalty to superiors and the keeping of promises. (VII.24)

As the passages above show us, Confucius put much weight on moral development as the single most important purpose of learning. The principal aim of schooling is moral instruction, the building of character so that one truly become a gentleman. Ultimately, moral growth is the most decisive factor also for the outcome of a person's life.<sup>4</sup> Hence, he frequently warned his students to make right rather than profit the motive of their conduct and to be ever mindful of the moral end of learning, stating that "a gentleman takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay." (IV.16)

This characteristic of Confucian education contrasts with our present system. Our group

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<sup>3</sup> See Nivison (1996), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> See D.C. Lau's "Introduction" in Confucius (1983).

conducted a survey among 119 undergraduate and post-graduate students in Hong Kong and found that majority of the respondents pay little attention to the moral aspect. In particular, when asked to rank their priority among five areas of personal development (i.e., moral, intellectual, physical, social and artistic), moral development ranked third or fourth. Moreover, an attitude of relativism was found with morality, which is thought to depend on variable factors of personal preference, place, time and circumstances. In other words, there is a mistaken idea that there are no absolute truths and unchanging principles of human behavior. Confucius, of course, taught otherwise and in the following passage, C.S. Lewis shows that the recognition of universal, unchanging moral principles are common to great, world traditions:

This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as ‘the *Tao*’ (...). It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. Those who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not (...) Our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order. (Lewis, 2001, pp.18-19)

### *1.2 Having Good Learning Dispositions*

We mentioned earlier that for Confucius, becoming an ideal – or *successful* person – is relative to economic means and social standing. Because of this, he was open to training anybody, for as long as that person was willing to dedicate himself to life-long learning entailing unswerving effort in cultural and moral cultivation. As he said, we should “learn as if you were following someone whom you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing,” (VIII.7). In other words, Confucius valued his students’ openness to learning with all that this implies: respect for authority, intellectual humility, initiative and motivation, dedication. Such disposition was the indispensable condition for education to be fruitful and signaled the student’s readiness for still higher learning.

Only one who bursts with eagerness do I instruct; only one who bubbles with excitement do I enlighten. If I hold up one corner (of a square) and a man cannot come

back with the other three, I do not continue the lesson. (VIII.7)

Hong Kong students have largely been spoon-fed. We are accustomed to being given all the information we need and have thus developed a passive attitude towards learning. Interaction between teacher and student by way of active discussion is minimal. Often, we are afraid or simply do not bother to respond or raise questions in class. In our survey, we found that students prefer to solve problems by reading reference books on their own rather than approaching teachers. This is very different from the interactive and dialogical form of learning which Confucius practiced and the personal rapport that he established with his students, coupled of course with respect and reverence for authority.

### *1.3 Humanistic and Holistic Approach*

Although the gentleman is above all a person of moral integrity, intellectual capacity and the cultivation of artistic taste and skills are also part of being a gentleman.<sup>5</sup> Hence, he is to be versant in history and letters, well-trained in sports (e.g., archery and charioteering), endowed with a fine taste for music and dance, as well as having authentic concern for fellow citizens:

A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and can see a question only from one side. (II.4)

A gentleman is widely versed in letters and at the same time knows how to submit his learning to the restraints of ritual. (VI.25)

Tzu-lu asked about the qualities of a true gentleman. The Master said, He cultivates in himself the capacity to be diligent in his tasks (and) cultivates in himself the capacity to ease the lot of other people. (XIV.45)

Here again, the present form of education in Hong Kong varies from the Confucian school. With a markedly specialized education, a holistic view to learning is hampered. Educational institutions are generally seen as mere training grounds for acquiring skills that will allow one to land a good-paying job after graduation. So, for example, it is common for students in the medical field to be advanced in clinical skills and knowledge while not having sound criteria and firm principles on issues of life, death, and suffering – human realities which their nature of

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<sup>5</sup> Confucius (1983), p. 37..

work bring them to face daily. In other words, higher institutions of learning are tendentially reduced to training grounds for technical skills (e.g., communication skills, marketing skills, computer skills, etc.) with students and school authorities themselves being overly result-oriented. While acquiring specialized, technical skills are also important, focusing solely or primarily on them does generate problems such as unbalanced personal formation, a narrow life view, and vulnerability to ethical malpractice. In this context, Confucius' call to a morally-centered, holistic, humanistic education proves helpful. The passage below is worth noting:



A man who  
*Treats his betters as betters,*  
*Wears an air of respect,*  
*Who in serving father and mother knows how to put his whole strength,*  
*Who in the service of his prince will lay down his life,*  
*Who in intercourse with friends is true to his word –*  
Others may say of him that he still lacks education, but I for my part should certainly call him an educated man. (I.7)

## 2. READING CLASSIC LITERATURE

Now that we have seen *what* the Confucian School is like, we can explore *how* Confucius put his style of education into practice. In this section, we want to show that for Confucius, familiarity with time-tested literary works is an indispensable means for moral inspiration, cultural refinement and, acquiring a broad view. In fact, Confucius described himself as a lover of the past (i.e., supposedly the period when sage kings ruled China and brought harmony to the land through moral exemplarity) and considered the transmission of ancient culture (i.e., unchanging values) to be his life mission: “I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own; I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients.” (VII.1)

When Confucius talked about China's glorious past, he was speaking of the history, collection of literary forms, and treasury of insights contained in the famous *Five Classics*, remnants of prose and poetry from China's first three dynasties, *Hsia*, *Shang* and *Chou* (3rd millennium B.C. until 249

B.C.). Confucius and his followers painstakingly edited, annotated and handed down these classics for all generations in China. The chart below describes these *Five Classics*, alongside classic literature which another great thinker, Aristotle, recommended for learning.

The Five Classics		Greek Drama	
	<p><b>Book of Odes</b> - collection of songs, hymns and poems using elegant and graceful language; it gives standards for etiquette and extols virtues like filial piety and reverence.</p>	<p><b>Epic Tales of Homer</b> e.g., the Iliad and the Odyssey, tales of courage, patriotism and piety that give a sense of history and are also a source of moral inspiration.</p>	
	<p><b>Book of History</b> - contains tales of courage and self-sacrifice about political figures of China's remote past; with its ideas about good government and responsibility when holding power, it helps readers to evaluate political systems.</p>	<p><b>Tragedy</b> e.g., those written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; considered literature <i>par excellence</i> because they teach eloquently about human nature, justice, and moral responsibility. They also venture into the reason for suffering.</p>	
	<p><b>Book of Rites</b> - enumerates rules of conduct and propriety that give order and harmony in social and family relations; its underlying idea is that gestures and rituals are external manifestations of moral virtue.</p>		
	<p><b>Book of Changes</b> - a cryptic work with moral and philosophical implications; among other things, it extols harmony, love of nature, humility and the idea of virtue as mean.</p>	<p><b>Comedy</b> e.g. those of Aristophanes; a vehicle for expressing socio-political insights, highly entertaining because of its wit and ingenuity; though not reliable for historical and philosophical data, they actually functioned as a form of literary criticism. The <i>Frogs</i>, for example, teaches about the poet's role to edify and instruct the audience.</p>	
	<p><b>Spring &amp; Autumn Annals</b> - records events in the state of Lu from 722 to 481 B.C.; it gives readers a sense of history and identity and teaches them about conditions for authority.</p>		

As with other well-known literature in the world, the rich content of the *Five Classics* are a source of knowledge and enlightenment. Confucius confirmed the importance of cultural reading. In the passage below, he shows that familiarity with great literature helps shape emotions, provides mental stimulation, serves as healthy leisure, and widens vocabulary.

The *Songs* will help you to incite people's emotions, to observe their feelings, to keep

company, to express grievances. They may also be used at home in the service of one's father; abroad, in the service of one's prince. Moreover, they will widen your acquaintance with the names of birds, beasts, plants and trees. (XVII.9)

Most importantly, the historical tales and the edification of heroes, as well as the moral and philosophical insights reflected in literary pieces insight men to right behavior: "If out of three hundred *Songs* I had to take one phrase to cover all my teaching, I would say 'Let there be no evil in your thoughts.'" (II.2)

In sum, Confucius regarded exposure to quality literature – as well as other forms of art – as a most useful and indispensable tool for personal growth because they provide intellectual stimulus, increase capacity for communication and give opportunity for moral reflection, among other things. We think that the coincidence of his view with another great thinker, Aristotle, points to the universal recognition of the advantage of cultural reading and that every nation has its collection of worthwhile classics to entertain and mold young minds. In this regard, another ancient work states that the Five Classics express values that can be found in different points of the globe:

When one enters a country, its teachings can be ascertained. When the people are gentle and honest, they show the teaching of the Book of Songs. When they are thorough and farsighted, they show the teachings of the Book of History. When they are profound and good, they show the teachings of the Book of Music. When they are pure, quiet and subtle, they show the teachings of the Book of Changes. When they are polite, frugal, grave and respectful, they show the teachings of the Book of Rites. When they put their words together and compare events with deeds, they show the teachings of the Spring and Autumn Annals. ("Interpretation of the Classics" in the *Record of Rites*).<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>6</sup> As cited in Chen (1972), pp. 2-3.

In the course of this paper, we have looked at the present state of Hong Kong education and the corresponding learning attitude of university students, we have identified its inherent difficulties, and have explored how the Confucian school, with its advocacy of classic culture, provides a solution.

In recent years, due to much-publicized scandals in the business world and unethical work practices, the Hong Kong government realized the need to strengthen moral instruction and consequently carried out campaigns to increase social awareness through public ads. They also sought to renew interest in humanities by re-orienting or adding subjects in secondary school and including “broadening courses” and professional ethics in the university curriculum. While these are commendable steps, we think that students can also take the initiative to match their skills of specialization with a broad and deep culture by reading classic works. It is a means that is easily accessible since it does not require much money nor time: only a simple trip to the nearest public library or perhaps a slight modification in the way one spends leisure time.

We end this presentation with words from a Hong Kong professor and former Taiwan Minister, Lung Ying-Tai, that well summarizes the idea of this paper: to complement specialization with the holistic and humanistic outlook that cultural nourishment brings:

There is a critical difference between a technician and a thinker.

If you turn out any number of good technicians and you just want a well-fed and well-bred (society), your economy will probably do well for some time and you could also transplant systems from abroad.

But if your vision for society is something different, and you want your society to generate ideas, thoughts and innovations of your own that can contribute to the prosperity of the world, that’s a different matter. If you are imagining that, someday, this country will produce great novelists, great philosophers and great scientists, your soil of culture then has to be very deep.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted from interview by Cheok Suk-Wai entitled “Cultivating culture from the bottom up” in *The Straits Times*, August 24, 2004.

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