

The Scholar's Compass: Confucian Ideals and Education in a Global Context

Edited by Téa Sernelj

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The Scholar's Compass: Confucian Ideals and Education in a Global Context

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INTRODUCTION

Téa SERNELJ and Jana S. ROŠKER

Learning to Be Human – Confucian Models of Education in a Global Age

Most of the contributions in this volume were originally published almost a decade ago in the special issue of the journal *Asian Studies*, Volume 5, Issue 2 (2017), on Confucian education. Given the ongoing relevance of its central themes, especially in light of the deepening global educational crises and the increasing interest in non-Western pedagogical models, we found it timely and important to reissue these essays in a collected volume. In doing so, we aim to offer a more accessible and coherent presentation of the diverse perspectives on Confucian education discussed therein. This revised and expanded edition also includes several new segments, particularly an innovative, comprehensive study by Pan Hongru, which constitutes roughly one third of the book and provides a fresh comparative analysis of Chinese and American elementary math textbooks through a transcultural lens. Her contribution brings new depth to the volume by connecting classical Confucian educational ideals with contemporary practices in global education.

Since Immanuel Kant's seminal essay "What is Enlightenment?", independent, autonomous, and critical thinking has stood at the forefront of any "progressive" (and even reasonable) theory of education. Yet in today's neoliberal and globalized world, the commodification of knowledge has affected even

this ideal. While critical thinking remains the basis of democratic agency, it has also become a product – something to be bought, sold, or even co-opted – along with its traditional home: institutional education. We may well be witnessing the decline of a particular kind of humanistic learning.

This volume, however, does not mourn such a loss. Instead, it explores possible alternatives. It also brings attention to another educational tradition, that of Confucianism. Though not grounded in ideals of absolute independence, Confucian education has always emphasized critical reflection, ethical development, and relational autonomy. Contrary to widespread prejudice, Confucianism is not simply a doctrine of obedience and hierarchy. As the texts in this collection argue, Confucian educational models are based on reciprocal responsibility, moral cultivation, and a deep commitment to humaneness.

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The Confucian classics assign central importance to ideational and ethical elements – ritual, relationality, virtue, and justice – and view education as a lifelong process of self-cultivation. While they also include subjects like the “Six Arts” (ritual, music, archery, chariot riding, calligraphy, and mathematics), morality stands above all. Confucian pedagogy favours dialogical learning: teachers guide by asking questions and offering analogies, not through authoritative exposition.

Confucius’ famous view that “learning without thinking is labour lost; thinking without learning is perilous” reflects the balance he sought between reason and experience, autonomy and tradition. Confucian education, far from being dogmatic, promotes tolerance and moral independence. In that spirit, this volume seeks to offer models of learning that go beyond technocratic training and neoliberal metrics of efficiency. It advocates for educational paradigms that foster relational selves – beings who think critically, act ethically, and live meaningfully in community with others.

Admittedly, the values that Confucian education aimed to foster did not include much absolute independence, but it still laid emphasis on autonomous critical thinking and genuine humaneness. While many believe that Confucianism is incompatible with a critical mind and personal autonomy, this volume aims to show that this widespread prejudice is rooted in a lack of knowledge. The most common image of traditional Confucianism is that it advocated a strict, rigid and hierarchically structured society based on the absolute obedience of those at the subordinate levels of the system, and, analogously, on the absolute power of their superiors. However, we would like to present another image of Confucian education, one that is more academically justified and closer to the truth. It is important to recall that this model was

originally, and especially in the classical Confucian teachings, rooted in the principles of complementarity and reciprocal responsibility. Moreover, while the autocratic model of hierarchy, by which the ruler's authority was absolute and their responsibility towards their subordinates reduced to a mere formalism or symbolism, has undeniably held sway in Chinese history, we must also bear in mind that Confucianism in its role as the state doctrine represented the interests of the ruling class, and as such was defined by legalistic elements that are not found in original Confucianism. We must not forget that hierarchical structures are also present in Western democratic systems, and most importantly, authority based on experience, knowledge and abilities is not necessarily a negative ideal, or a threat to individual autonomy.

As already mentioned above, a Confucian teacher never lectures at length on a subject. Instead, he or she poses questions, quotes passages from the classical works, or applies fitting analogies, and then waits for the students to find the right answers "independently" – by themselves. This method is based on the notion of moral autonomy, which is typical of the Confucian ideal personality, and implicit in most Confucian discourses.

As such, promoting education is one of the most important Confucian values, and it is said that it is better to educate one's children than to give them wealth. However, education is not only the wealth of an individual, but also that of the cultures and societies they live within. It is the most valuable legacy we can give to future generations. Moreover, in today's globalized world, in which different traditions can interact and learn from each other, this kind of inheritance can be exchanged, combined, synthesized and thus enriched.

As such, this volume aims to raise awareness regarding a particular, culturally and historically conditioned model of institutions, didactic structures and axiological priorities, which differs profoundly from traditional Euro-American educational models. It is structured around two broad themes. The first is linked to *Confucian Theories of Education in China and the Sinic Area*. This first part opens with Margus Ott's article "Confucius' Embodied Knowledge". In this essay, the author argues that the modern embodiment theory could help us to understand some critical aspects of Confucianism and the Confucian theory of knowledge, and vice versa. Through a systematic analysis of classical sources, Ott shows that – in contrast to Western ideational history – China in general and Confucianism in particular has a very long tradition of embodied knowledge and embodied cognition. This essay is followed by David Bartosch's paper, "Explicit and Implicit Aspects of Confucian Education", and it investigates Confucian methods of manifest and latent knowledge in order to identify

possible approaches for their adaptation, modernization and fruitful synthesis with modern educational science. The next two contributions deal with Confucian education in the broader geopolitical context of East and Southeast Asia, and thus in different regions belonging to the area that was historically influenced by Confucian teachings. The first was written by Marko Ogrizek, who explores certain transformations and the fate of Confucian teachings in pre-modern Japan. Ogrizek's article, "Following the Way of the Ancient Kings: The Concept of 'Learning' in the Teachings of Ogyū Sorai", introduces Sorai's concept of learning, which is based on studying "the Way of the ancient Kings". Since Ogyū Sorai is among the most famous and influential Japanese Confucian philosophers of the Edo period, his teachings had wide-ranging implications both for the educational and political systems of pre-modern Japan. In order to gain an insight into the ethical and political consequences of Sorai's interpretations, the author demonstrates how and why he was basing his interpretation of value and meaning, as prescribed by the ancient sages, chiefly on the reverence of the unknowable, and his concept of following the Way mainly on faith in the sages. The last contribution of this first part is titled "A Vietnamese Reading of the Master's Classic: Phạm Nguyễn Du's *Humble Comments on the Analects* as an Example of Transformative Learning", and was written by the Vietnamese scholar Nam Nguyen. It offers a remarkable insight into a topic that is still widely unknown in Western scholarship, namely the Vietnamese reception and reinterpretation of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism.

The second part of this volume is devoted to the *Contemporary Implications* of Confucian Education, and includes three contributions, written by Kirill O. Thompson, Jana S. Rošker, and Pan Hongru, respectively. It opens with Thompson's article, entitled "Lessons from Zhu Xi's Views on Inquiry and Learning for Contemporary Advanced Humanities Education and Research". This paper deals with important questions regarding the crisis of the contemporary humanities, the sense, purpose and function of which seem to be gradually getting lost in our globalized world. Because of widescale social transitions, which inevitably also influence education at all levels, formal schooling is increasingly often reduced to just the training of efficient professional experts, without considering that every society also needs responsible, thoughtful and cultivated people. As a meaningful alternative, the author introduces Zhu Xi's model of "advanced learning", which is comparable to contemporary college education and not only provides students with the necessary factual knowledge about society and the world, but also cultivates them in order to develop their sensibility, logic and abilities of autonomous judgement. The author shows that Zhu Xi's educational theories imply the importance of such cultivation, which is a necessary and elementary part of

every sensitive, responsible, reflective and self-aware human being. I, Jana S. Rošker, the editor of this volume and author of the second article on this broad theme, then write about “Contemporary Confucianism as a Form of East Asian Social Knowledge”, and likewise ground my contribution in the problematic global tendencies seen in contemporary education. Proceeding from the notion of Confucianism as a form of social knowledge in East Asia, in this text I aim to explain why and how the Modern Confucian emphasis on the traditional Confucian link between comprehension and the ethical evaluation of being is of great importance for a gradual restoration of the “credibility” of ancient Chinese thought in the context of modern social knowledge. The last contribution in this volume is written by Pan Hongru, a Chinese PhD student at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her essay “A Comparative Study of Chinese vs American Elementary Math Textbooks Through a Transcultural Lens” investigates the influences of Confucian values in contemporary education in the People’s Republic of China. Pan’s paper represents a comparative analysis of Chinese and American elementary mathematics textbooks through a transcultural lens. It explores how Confucian relationism and neoliberal individualism are embedded in educational content, particularly in mathematics problems. While Chinese textbooks incorporate values like family, community, and environmental responsibility, reflecting Confucian ethics and holistic humanism, US textbooks emphasize autonomy, consumer behaviour, and competition, aligned with neoliberal ideals. The study proposes a dialectical sublation of these paradigms to envision a more ethically grounded and relational pedagogy in global education.

Structured in these two main parts – on classical Confucian educational theory and its contemporary practical implications, this book covers a wide geographical and disciplinary range. It includes analyses of Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese Confucianism as well as reflections on Zhu Xi’s legacy, modern social knowledge, and intercultural textbook analysis. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider what it means to educate a person in today’s world, and what we might still learn from an ancient tradition that never ceased to consider this question.

We hope that this diverse collection of articles, which together illuminate Confucian teachings and views on education from several different perspectives, will help readers to obtain a better understanding of this important element of ancient and traditional East Asian cultural heritage. It is an especially valuable heritage, which can – *inter alia* – enable us to understand that education is much more than a few years of training in professional expertise. It is a lifelong process, because learning to be truly human is a never-ending project.

PART I, THEORY:

**CONFUCIAN THEORIES OF
EDUCATION IN CHINA IN THE
SINIC AREA**

Margus OTT

Confucius' Embodied Knowledge

Abstract

The main purpose of the present article is to explicitly link the *Analects* to embodiment theory (ET). As indicated in the introduction, embodiment has been an important topic in recent Sinological research, but until now rather few explicit connections have been made with ET. In relation to embodied knowledge, the article discusses the following topics: embodiment, embeddedness, enactment, extendedness, emotivity, implicitness, emergence, joy and apprenticeship or self-cultivation. The same themes are found to be important in the *Analects*, with a plethora of examples. Arguably, ET could thus be a useful paradigm for discussing several important themes of the *Analects*. And with the *Analects* being one of the founding texts of the Chinese philosophical tradition – although similar concerns are found in other texts – it could also be beneficial to further developments in the ET itself, on the condition that its proponents familiarize themselves with the Chinese philosophical tradition where important issues of ET have been explicitly discussed for two and a half millennia.

Keywords: embodiment theory, Confucianism, *Analects*, comparative philosophy, enactivism

Introduction

Several claims similar to the ideas outlined in this article have been made about the Chinese tradition from the 19th century until today. Notably, Chinese thought has been described as “concrete” in contrast to “abstract”, “practical” in contrast to “theoretical”, “aesthetical” in contrast to “scientific” (cf. Hall and Ames 1998; Nakamura 1964; Li 2010; Jung 2011), etc. In this article, I propose Embodiment Theory (ET) as a useful framework for bringing out deeper distinctions which, among others, could give a more precise meaning to the claims of those authors.

ET formed partly as a critique of the previously dominant understanding of knowledge as disembodied, abstract, general, contemplative, explicit, representational, free from emotions and particular contexts, and so on.¹ This is a derived mode of knowledge that can never be completely separated from its embodied context. Interest in different aspects of ET has been widespread in recent decades (for an overview, see Shapiro 2014; Wilson and Foglia 2015; Gallagher and Schmicking 2010, 181–252).

In Sinology, too, there has been a growing interest in embodiment viewed from different angles and concerning its various features in the history of Chinese thought (Emerson 1996; Sivin 1995; Lewis 2006; Jullien 2007; Sommer 2008), medicine (Kuriyama 2002; Hsu 2007), Daoism (Schipper 1978; Despeux 2005; Kohn 2006), the senses (Geaney 2002; Sterckx 2003), emotions (Zhang 2007), and power (Zito and Barlow 1994), to name just a few examples. Some fields, like medicine, inherently involve the body. Moreover, in principle, all overviews of early Confucianism should contain an explanation of the role of rituals, and hence some presentation of embodiment.

Still, in Sinological works there are few explicit connections with contemporary ET, and at the same time the Western scholarship on embodiment has limited references to other traditions, perhaps simply due to the isolation of various curricula.² The aim of the present article is thus to explicitly connect ET with the Chinese tradition.

1 See Nietzsche’s (posthumously and controversially edited) *Will to Power* § 636 (1967, 339–40) and “On the Despisers of the Body” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006, 22–24) and Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception” (1945).

2 Although there are, of course, places where they come together. For instance, National Taiwan University Press has a recent book series called “Body and Nature” (身體與自然) that has a volume edited by Shunde Yu (2015), directly concerning questions of embodiment in both traditions.

In what follows, I will briefly describe some aspects of embodied cognition and then move on to a more detailed presentation of the corresponding topics in the *Analects*.

Embodied Knowledge

It has been shown that our knowledge is shaped by the kind of body we have (Shapiro 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Embodiment extends beyond the brain and nervous system and even beyond our skin to other people and the environment. Without the body, it is difficult to conceive how anything could have a meaning or relevance, because meaning is something that stands out from a background: something is selected and paid special attention to, while everything else is left unheeded. Selecting everything is the same as selecting nothing. But who or what selects, if not our bodies, we as embodied agents? From the very beginning, the field of experience is differentiated and we make axiological distinctions because our bodies – and we as embodied and social beings – have positive needs for food, drink, warmth, human company, etc., and negative needs to avoid excessive tactile, chemical, auditory, and visual stimuli, along with human aggression and other harms and irritants.

Cognition and existence in general are embedded in a certain physical, social, cultural, historical context (Damasio 1994, 83–113; Heidegger 1996;³ Dawson 2014; see also Uexküll 1926 and 1957 for a general theory of Umwelt). As we said above, the world we are embedded in is not homogeneous and isotropic, but heterogeneous and anisotropic, i.e. it has distinctions and preferred directions according to our needs and desires. We do not live in an indifferent 3D space, but the space as we experience it opens up from a certain viewpoint; it indicates possible movements and interactions in it; we experience space and things as affording certain actions and inhibiting others. An experienced space is already a meaningful one.

Cognition is also enacted. We do not live in a predefined world that we should somehow just “observe” and take notice of (which would require a special effort), but, in the last analysis, we have to form all of our knowledge in an experiential, enacted way (Varela et al. 1991; Noë and Thompson 2002; Noë 2004). This implies sensorimotor engagement with our environment. The

3 See, in particular his analysis of Being-in-the-World, Being-Together, Attunement, Care, Facticity and Historicity. Heidegger shows how the “ontic” spatiotemporal and social determinations are based on a more primordial Being-in-the-World, Being-Together and Being-Toward-Death, and how these determinations are not extrinsic to the existence, but belong to its very core.

two parts, perceiving and acting, cannot be separated as in the traditional “sandwich model”, according to which we receive some input (perception), process it (cognition) and give some output (action) (see Ward and Stapleton 2012). Initially and for the most part, we do not perceive for some theoretical reasons, but perception is meant to inform our action. While acting, we create certain perceptions that are fed back into the system, so that the results of our actions can modulate the way we act and we can become more adapted in our activities.

As already implied in the concept of embeddedness, embodied cognition is also extended: we think to a large extent with the help of the things in our environment. The body itself has an extension and duration, and it can extend to other things, e.g. for a blind person, a stick becomes a sensing organ; when we drive a car, our perceived bodily dimensions extend to the car (so we can feel where we can pass and where not), etc. A very special way of extending embodied knowledge is to adopt another person’s viewpoint. Indeed, other people are very important “tools” for extending and correcting our knowledge and behaviour.

Embodiment always also entails a certain emotive background for our life and activities (Damasio 1994, 127–64; Maiese 2014). On a very basic level, the needs that structure our world and experience have an intrinsic affective aspect: by definition, a need is something we *feel* as a need. It concerns our bodily existence in a positive or negative way, and we feel it as first-person subjects. On an even more basic level, we could say in a Spinozist way that the very fact of being directed towards our surroundings and being interested in them is an affect, more specifically, a desire (see *Ethics* III, prop. 6–9, Spinoza 2002, 283–4, cf. also Maiese 2011). Embodied existence is a desiring existence. It is deeper than our conscious activities and self-understanding, which presuppose it. Desire is the basis of our intentionality and directedness towards something.

In addition to the five Es mentioned above (embodied, enacted, embedded, extended, emotive) there are other important topics related to embodiment. First of all, implicitness. This is an important aspect of the “personal” or “tacit knowledge” discussed by Michael Polanyi (1962): a behaviour always contains more than can be expressed in words or rules. In order to master an art (swimming, sewing, playing the piano, etc.), textbook information is not enough, and instead one has to acquire personal and experiential understanding of the art. This applies not only in sports and crafts, but also in science (how to handle a scientific apparatus, how to read the results, and so on).

Embodied knowledge is emergent, it is not previously given in a programme, but emerges in interactions with the environment. For example, Esther Thelen and Linda Smith (1996) have shown that although the general developmental histories of children can be similar, they accomplish them by very different means. Andy Clark (1998) has discussed emergence in the case of robotics, with important implications for the general theory of embodiment.

There is one aspect that is present, but not particularly stressed in the current ET, namely the joy entailed in the skilful performance of an art or ability, when one is not constrained by the particulars of the art, but is able to perform them smoothly, gracefully, effortlessly (the “feeling of flow”, see Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

Finally, embodied knowledge has to be learned through experience and with guidance:

Connoisseurship, like skill, can be communicated only by example, not by precept. To become an expert wine-taster, to acquire a knowledge of innumerable different blends of tea or to be trained as a medical diagnostician, you must go through a long course of experience under the guidance of a master. (Polanyi 1962, 56; cf. Deleuze 1994, 164 sqq.)

It also has implications for moral self-development (Jackson 1983; Strojcek and Zhong 2014). In the following, we trace the aforementioned topics in the *Analects*.

Embodied Knowledge in the *Analects*

With the help of ET, we can make sense of the parts of the *Analects* that would seem the least philosophical to a Western reader,⁴ such as the descriptions of Confucius' behaviour in book 10.

When called on by his lord to receive a guest, his countenance would become alert and serious, and he would hasten his steps. When he saluted those in attendance beside him – extending his clasped hands to the left or right, as their position required – his robes remained perfectly arrayed, both front and back. Hastening forward, he moved smoothly, as though gliding upon wings. Once the guest had left, he would always return to report, “The guest is no longer looking back.” (10.3)⁵

4 “This chapter is often skipped over in embarrassment by Western scholars” (Jones 2008, 121).

5 All the English translations of the *Analects* are from Slingerland (2003).

君召使擯，色勃如也，足躩如也。揖所與立，左右手。衣前後，檐如也。趨進，翼如也。賓退，必復命曰：「賓不顧矣。」⁶

When entering the gate of his Duke, he would draw himself in, as if the gate were not large enough to admit him. He would not come to a halt at the centre of the doorway and when walking would not tread upon the threshold. When passing by his appointed place, his countenance would become alert and serious, he would hasten his steps, his words falling to a whisper as if he could barely get them out. When he ascended to the Duke's dais with the hem of his gown gathered in his hands, he would draw himself in, slowing his breath to the point that it seemed as if he were not breathing at all. Upon leaving the Duke's dais, his expression would relax as he descended the top stair, and he would seem at ease. On reaching the bottom of the stairs, he would hasten forward smoothly, as though gliding upon wings. When returning to his own place, he would resume his attitude of cautious respect. (10.4)

入公門，鞠躬如也，如不容。立不中門，行不履闕。過位，色勃如也，足躩如也，其言似不足者。攝齊升堂，鞠躬如也，屏氣似不息者。出，降一等，逞顏色，怡怡如也。沒階趨進，翼如也。復其位，蹶蹶如也。

This shows that Confucius' speech, behaviour and even physiological reactions change according to the situation.⁷ His actions have attained a supreme grace, smoothness and ease (he seems to "glide upon wings" 翼如也). His steps, countenance, breathing and everything else changes according to the context: on official occasions he is serious, barely breathes, hastens his steps, at home he is relaxed.

When grasping the official jade tablet, he would draw himself in, as if he could not bear its weight. Sometimes he held it high against his forehead as if saluting, while at other times he held it low at his waist as if offering a gift. Alert and serious, his expression would be like someone about to go into battle, and he would walk with shortened steps as though each movement were carefully scripted. During the ceremonial exchange of gifts, his countenance was accommodating; when having his private audience, he seemed at ease. (10.5)

執圭，鞠躬如也，如不勝。上如揖，下如授。勃如戰色，足蹢蹢，如有循。享禮，有容色。私覲，愉愉如也。

6 The Chinese originals are from the *Chinese Text Project*.

7 It is indeed an *ars contextualis*, as Hall and Ames (1998) put it.

The same book of the *Analects* also describes Confucius' way of dressing, eating, sleeping, sitting, riding a carriage and so on. This shows how all of his behaviour is ritualized, up to the very details of his everyday life and even unconscious behaviour (sleeping, dreaming, cf. 7.5). This implies that Confucius' teaching is well embodied and embedded in a context.

Embedded (Temporal)

This is summed up in the final part of book 10, where Confucius says: "This pheasant upon the mountain bridge – how timely it is!" (山梁雌雉，時哉！時哉！). This timeliness has been traditionally understood as describing his own behaviour – Confucius is a "timely sage". In ET, it is stressed how the agent is embedded in a context, and this context should not be understood only in spatial but also in temporal terms: an action takes place at a certain time, with certain temporal modulations (the swiftness or relaxation of Confucius' steps, for example), and at a certain age of the agent:

My master only spoke when the time was right, and so people never grew impatient listening to him. (14.13)

夫子時然後言，人不厭其言。

To speak when it is not yet time to speak – this is called being rash. To not speak when it is time to speak – this is called being secretive. To speak without taking into account the countenance of one's lord – this is called being blind. (16.6)

言未及之而言謂之躁，言及之而不言謂之隱，未見顏色而言謂之瞽。

Confucius said, "The gentleman guards against three things: when he is young, and his blood and vital essence are still unstable, he guards against the temptation of female beauty; when he reaches his prime, and his blood and vital essence have become unyielding, he guards against being contentious; when he reaches old age, and his blood and vital essence have begun to decline, he guards against being acquisitive." (16.7)

孔子曰：「君子有三戒：少之時，血氣未定，戒之在色；及其壯也，血氣方剛，戒之在鬪；及其老也，血氣既衰，戒之在得。」

This means that there cannot be a context-independent set of principles that one could apply anytime and anywhere. Or to put it differently, the most universal principles necessarily have to be enacted according to the time and context. The same action can be right or not right, depending on the

conditions. Flexibility is thus an inevitable part of adaptive embodied behaviour. A smooth and graceful action is an action that with real-time feedback from the environment is able to change and adapt itself.⁸ This is obvious on the everyday level: for example, when I walk around, my feet and body spontaneously adapt to the conditions of the terrain (whether it is slippery or not, what obstacles there are, in ascent or descent, etc.), or when I write with a pencil, I automatically adapt to the specific pencil and paper I have at hand (its thickness, the degree of pressure needed, the qualities of the paper and the support it is on, etc.).⁹

Flexibility as sensitivity to context is highly valued by Confucians:

The Master was entirely free of four faults: arbitrariness, inflexibility, rigidity, and selfishness. (9.4)

子絕四：毋意，毋必，毋固，毋我。

The Master said, “The gentleman is true, but not rigidly trustworthy.” (15.37)

子曰：「君子貞而不諒。」

On one occasion, two students ask Confucius the same question, but he gives two different answers to them. A third student overhears both exchanges and asks for the reason. Confucius replies:

The Master said, “Ran Qiu is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back.” (11.22)

子曰：「求也退，故進之；由也兼人，故退之。」

A good teacher is able to adapt the message according to the receiver.

Confucian self-cultivation extends flexibility to very complex situations of social behaviour. Experientially, such adaptivity is clear and easy, but computationally, due to the real-time feedback and non-linearity that arises from it, it is extremely complex. This is why machines, while excelling at things we

8 This does not necessarily mean being “spineless”, because certain social contexts (a tyranny, for instance) might themselves be unadaptive to a wider order of things, to the *dao*. The *Analects* contain plenty of denunciations of the social order of the time by Confucius.

9 Merleau-Ponty (1945, 180–1) remarks the ease with which organists are able to adapt themselves to different organs that can be very different from each other in their physical makeup. A few hours of practice are sufficient for an organist to be able to play on a new organ. Keys, stops and pedals are positioned at different places and distances, but an organist has a “feeling” of how to play an organ, and so is able to adapt to the actual instrument.

find difficult (computing), tend to be less adept at things we find very easy (smooth movement).

Enacted

Confucius makes it clear that true knowledge is enacted and expresses itself in corresponding actions: knowledge is meant to enlighten action, and action reveals the level of knowledge:

The Master said, "I can talk all day long with Yan Hui without him once disagreeing with me. In this way, he seems a bit stupid. And yet when we retire and I observe his private behaviour, I see that it is in fact worthy to serve as an illustration of what I have taught. Hui is not stupid at all." (2.9)

子曰：「吾與回言終日，不違如愚。退而省其私，亦足以發。回也，不愚。」

The Master said, "Look at the means a man employs, observe the basis from which he acts, and discover where it is that he feels at ease. Where can he hide? Where can he hide?" (2.10)

子曰：「視其所以，觀其所由，察其所安。人焉廋哉？人焉廋哉？」

Someone who is accomplished is upright in his native substance and fond of rightness. He examines other people's words and observes their demeanour, and always takes the interests of his inferiors into account when considering something. (12.20)

夫達也者，質直而好義，察言而觀色，慮以下人。

The Master replied, "I observed him sitting in the presence of adults, and also walking alongside his elders. He is not looking to improve himself, but is just after quick success." (14.44)

子曰：「吾見其居於位也，見其與先生並行也。非求益者也，欲速成者也。」

Words, speaking and language are among the important aspects of expression, but they are also suspect, because it is much easier to lie with words than with bodily behaviour; it is easy to talk more than one understands, giving rein to boasting, deception, and make believe.

The Master said, "People in ancient times were not eager to speak, because they would be ashamed if their actions did not measure up to their words." (4.22)

子曰：「古者言之不出，恥躬之不逮也。」

The kernel of Confucius' thought is the practice of rites, which is a set of choreographed movements, songs and utterances, i.e. it is intrinsically embodied and enacted. There is more to the rites than just rote repetition, and we shall come to the when we talk about self-cultivation later in this chapter.

Extended

One aspect of the embeddedness and contextuality of knowledge is that it is extended (Aizawa 2014). First, the body itself is an extended vehicle of understanding, and second, it also extends to the items in the surroundings. For example, for a Confucian, musical instruments, ritual clothes and vessels, books, bows and arrows, etc. are all part and parcel of knowledge and meaning-making.

Ru Bei [sent a messenger expressing his] wish to have an audience with Confucius, but Confucius declined, saying that he was ill. As soon as the messenger went out the door, however, Confucius picked up his zither and sang, making sure that the messenger could hear him. (17.20)

孺悲欲見孔子，孔子辭以疾。將命者出戶，取瑟而歌，使之聞之。

Those instruments extend the body, through them we are lead to the higher meanings of existence (filial piety, humaneness, appropriateness etc).¹⁰

The most important extensions of knowledge are other human beings, and the most important extension is to replace one's own viewpoint with another person's. This idea of extension is also expressed in the Golden Rule:

Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire. (12.2 and 15.24)

己所不欲，勿施於人。

This is the prerequisite for becoming humane, *ren* 仁. It is both descriptive and prescriptive: on the one hand, humans have (as Mencius later explained) a proclivity to empathize with others (as exemplified in Mencius' famous story of spontaneously wanting to help a child who is about to fall into a well); and, on the other hand, during our lifetime we should expand and develop this capacity. It potentiates self-awareness: I am aware of others being aware of me. This leads to a generalized self-reflection (*fan* 反) in Mencius.

10 It should be noted that in Western descriptions of embodiment technical devices are very often used as examples of extendedness (e.g. the analysis of the "things at hand" by Heidegger 1996, 94–97).

Emotive

In this framework, emotions are not inherently an impediment to knowledge, and the aim of self-cultivation is not to rid oneself of emotions, but to refine and deepen them. A ritual without emotions is dead and without any real meaning and value. Our being-in-the-world and being-with-others are laden with emotive valences. Some of our strongest emotions are related to our fellow human beings: there is affection between parents and children, husband and wife, among friends, and so on. This is what happened after the death of Confucius' favourite student:

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master cried for him excessively. The disciples reproved him, saying, "Master, surely you are showing excessive grief!" The Master replied, "Am I showing excessive grief? Well, for whom would I show excessive grief, if not for this man?" (11.10)

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顏淵死，子哭之慟。從者曰：「子慟矣。」曰：「有慟乎？非夫人之為慟而誰為！」

Two things are important here: first, that Confucius behaves in this way not just in any situation, but in this special case, and thus he is not emotionally unstable. And second, that he does not seek to inhibit himself at the death of his favourite student, and is instead a sensitive man who is emotionally affected by the most intimate human relations. Feelings come first and ritual comes later (see 3.8).

Emotional engagement is one of the most important prerequisites of the rites:

The Master said, "A man who is not humane – what has he to do with ritual? A man who is not humane – what has he to do with music?" (3.3, translation modified)

子曰：「人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？」

Lin Fang asked about the roots of ritual. The Master exclaimed, "What a noble question! When it comes to ritual, it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious." (3.4)

林放問禮之本。子曰：「大哉問！禮，與其奢也，寧儉；喪，與其易也，寧戚。」

Emotions are the basis of things, and with rituals one can refine them, thus improving the whole human personality.

In general, an exemplary person is free from negative emotions:

Sima Niu asked about the gentleman. The Master replied, "The gentleman is free of anxiety and fear." "'Free of anxiety and fear' – is that all there is to being a gentleman?" "If you can look inside yourself and find no faults, what cause is there for anxiety or fear?" (12.4)

司馬牛問君子。子曰：「君子不憂不懼。」曰：「不憂不懼，斯謂之君子已乎？」子曰：「內省不疚，夫何憂何懼？」

Those emotions are not so much discarded by a conscious effort, but rather disappear by themselves when the personality is refined.

Implicitness

The contextuality of knowledge also leads to specific linguistic practices. On the one hand, words and sentences, of course, enable us to take a distance from the immediate situation and to take into consideration further facts and details. But on the other hand, this very distancing capacity of language has the danger of not suiting the context. Better than giving a general explanation is to give hints and suggestions, so that the person concerned can work out their own understanding in the particular context.

The Master said, "I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again." (7.8)

子曰：「不憤不啟，不悱不發，舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也。」

The main aim of studying is to learn to (re)construct, to attain the generative principles that manifest themselves in a specific situation. The teacher gives one "corner", one aspect, and the student has to guess the other, related aspects or "corners". In another fragment, Confucius approvingly says:

Zigong, you are precisely the kind of person with whom one can begin to discuss the Odes. Informed as to what has gone before, you know what is to come. (1.15)

賜也，始可與言詩已矣！告諸往而知來者。

Embodied knowledge is inherently overdetermined and the linguistic strategies that want to conform to this knowledge must also be greatly implicit, in an intentional attempt to imply in an utterance more than is explicitly said. An attempt to directly express an idea would remain inherently partial, poor. This kind of teaching was later taken to the extreme in the encounter dialogues of the *chan* Buddhism tradition, where a certain way of speaking and behaving was deemed to express enlightenment. Confucius' acts and words were also taken to express the right *dao*, a certain broader way of existence that one had to unfold for oneself from the cues that he gave.

Emergence

Contextual and embodied knowledge is essentially emergent. It does not contain universal ideas that are given beforehand, but arises in a specific context between specific interacting agents. We considered a fragment where Confucius gave different advice to different students according to the situation – this means that he did not have a ready precept, but that the knowledge emerged in the specific situation, taking into account the character of the given student. Another example is the following:

The Master said, “Do I possess wisdom? No, I do not. [For example, recently] a common fellow asked a question of me, and I came up completely empty. But I discussed the problem with him from beginning to end until we finally got to the bottom of it.” (9.8)

子曰：「吾有知乎哉？無知也。有鄙夫問於我，空空如也，我叩其兩端而竭焉。」

This is also a model to follow. One should encounter a situation with as few presuppositions as possible, being as “empty” as possible, and so let the articulations of the situation emerge by themselves. The problem with pre-given knowledge is that it makes you “full”, so that you are not able to see the situation objectively or impartially, but take some arbitrary familiar aspects of it and bend the whole situation according to some pre-existing matrix. Instead, if one is “empty” then one does not impose a ready-made framework on the situation, but is able to listen to the nuances of the particular situation, and then respond adequately.

Ease and Joy

The thorough ritualization of life should not be understood to mean that Confucius was constantly following some ritual rules and thus must have been rigidly formal all the time (although some of his critics might have said so). On the contrary, we see that he switched between effort in official occasions and relaxation in other times (cf. “In his leisure moments, the Master was composed and yet fully at ease”, 子之燕居，申申如也，夭夭如也，7.4), and that he achieved an ease also in those official occasions. In the words of Confucius’ student You Ruo:

When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease that is to be valued. It is precisely such harmony that makes the Way of the Former Kings so beautiful. If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either. (1.12)

禮之用，和為貴。先王之道斯為美，小大由之。有所不行，知和而和，不以禮節之，亦不可行也。

Or as Confucius puts it:

One who knows it is not the equal of one who loves it, and one who loves it is not the equal of one who takes joy in it. (6.20)

知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者。

Here, there is a deepening emotional involvement: first you know, then you like and finally you are able to enjoy it. The most famous quotation in this respect is 2.4:

The Master said, “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.”

子曰：「吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。」

Here Confucius is, in a sense, finally able to forget about ritual, so that even when he follows his heart’s desires he does not overstep propriety. The joy that a smooth action brings is consistent with the findings of contemporary

psychology: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) speaks about the “feeling of the flow” in certain activities that require concentration and exercise (playing the piano, tennis, etc.). Athletes, dancers, and musicians can attain this feeling during a good performance, and it is rewarding and enjoyable in itself.

Joy is directly related to the ability to live out one's years – both for internal reasons (it can be supposed that good mood generally produces better health) and most importantly for external reasons (when you are joyful, you get along better with others, and thus it lessens the probability of punishment, mutilation and execution):

Min Ziqian was attending the Master, standing at his side in a straight and correct manner; [also attending were] Zilu, looking bold and uncompromising, and Ran Qiu and Zigong, both of whom appeared happy and at ease. The Master was pleased, but remarked, “Someone like Zilu will not get to live out his years.” (11.13)

閔子侍側，闔闔如也；子路，行行如也；冉有、子貢，侃侃如也。子樂。「若由也，不得其死然。」

Emotional self-cultivation does not imply suppressing emotions, but rather regulating them:

Confucius said, “Beneficial types of joy number three, as do harmful types of joy. Taking joy in regulating yourself through the rites and music, in commending the excellence of others, or in possessing many worthy friends – these are the beneficial types of joy. Taking joy in arrogant behaviour, idle amusements, or decadent licentiousness – these are the harmful types of joys.” (16.5)

孔子曰：「侍於君子有三愆：言未及之而言謂之躁，言及之而不言謂之隱，未見顏色而言謂之瞽。」

An exemplary person avoids, to use Spinoza's terms, partial joys (or “tickle” *titillatio*, as he calls them) that concern just one part of our body, not the whole of us. Note that all of the beneficial joys are social, and that most of the time the exemplary person is at ease and joyful.

This leads to a *wuwei* situation, to effortless action:

The Master said, “One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.” (2.1)

子曰：「為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之。」

The Master said, "How majestic! Shun and Yu possessed the entire world and yet had no need to actively manage (*yu* 與) it." (8.18)

子曰：「巍巍乎！舜禹之有天下也，而不與焉。」

The Master said, "Is Shun not an example of someone who ruled by means of *wuwei*? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper [ritual] position facing south, that is all." (15.5)

子曰：「無為而治者，其舜也與？夫何為哉，恭己正南面而已矣。」

Whereas Csikszentmihalyi speaks about the feeling of flow in the case of master performers in sports and music, here the feeling arises from life as a whole, most of one's actions being appropriate to the context.

Self-cultivation

Michael Polanyi (1962) distinguished between explicit and tacit knowledge, and embodied knowledge is very much about the second. Explicit knowledge can be sufficiently specified in detail and transmitted by prescription over large spatiotemporal gaps (e.g. when I read a book written in another country in another era), and its understanding can be nearly instantaneous (e.g. if I learn the fact that $1+1=2$ or that Zhu Xi 朱熹 was born on October 18, 1130). But embodied knowledge is to a large extent tacit, it cannot be adequately specified, and its teaching involves personal example and a process of experience that cannot be shortened at will.

Much of Confucius' educational programme was precisely about how to convey tacit, implicit, embodied knowledge, and his personal example was extremely important in this (hence also the importance of his behaviour described in book 10 and discussed above). This kind of apprenticeship for students involves personal development and self-cultivation. It might seem strange that Chinese traditions lacking many aspects of religion (most notably, a description of gods or a God), like Confucianism or Mohism, have nevertheless inspired people for centuries (or even millennia) with a fervour and dedication that otherwise seem to characterize religious movements. While surely there were also aspects of religion in the narrow sense, they were often downplayed, and at least part of this may come from the embodied and contextual practices themselves. Ritual, for Confucius, is by itself self-cultivation:

The Master said, "If you are respectful but lack ritual you will become exasperating; if you are careful but lack ritual you will become timid; if

you are courageous but lack ritual you will become unruly; and if you are upright but lack ritual you will become inflexible. (8.2)

子曰：「恭而無禮則勞，慎而無禮則蕙，勇而無禮則亂，直而無禮則絞。君子篤於親，則民興於仁；故舊不遺，則民不偷。」

The ritual decides whether a characteristic trait (carefulness, courage, respect, uprightness) becomes a weakness or strength. The ritual has an integrating and modulating effect on different aspects of character. A weakness is something that is separated from the rest of one's personality, community and nature, and ritual is a way to integrate these and thus to refine one's character as a whole, developing its different aspects, preventing it from remaining one-sided.¹¹

This self-cultivation entails both effort and non-effort:

The Master said, "When native substance overwhelms cultural refinement, the result is a crude rustic. When cultural refinement overwhelms native substance, the result is a foppish pedant. Only when culture and native substance are perfectly mixed and balanced do you have a gentleman." (6.18)

子曰：「質勝文則野，文勝質則史。文質彬彬，然後君子。」

The whole of self-cultivation is not only a conscious striving, but the aim is to engage oneself as a whole, one's whole body, including unconscious strivings. The aim is not to artificially create a new man, but with the help of artificial or external means, like rites and music, to cultivate and refine one's natural character. As in Mencius' famous simile: one should not force one's nature like plucking the seedlings in order to "help them grow", but rather take care of one's nature and to gradually, in the course of time cultivate it, so that it grows by itself and becomes more nuanced.

Ritual is a kind of self-discipline:

Yan Hui asked about humaneness. The Master said, "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes humaneness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to humaneness. The key to achieving

11 In C.G. Jung's (1971) theory the human psyche tends to develop, in the course of life, aspects that are less pronounced in the beginning, so that under ideal conditions a person in a sense finally changes into their opposite. This is the phenomenon of "enantiodromia" or becoming-opposite. Of course, the previous dominant characteristics do not go away, so that the result is not a simple opposite of the initial situation, but a more nuanced, richer personality. It must be noted that Jung was also directly influenced by the Chinese *yin-yang* thinking.

humaneness lies within yourself – how could it come from others?” Yan Hui asked, “May I inquire as to the specifics?” The Master said, “Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual.” Yan Hui replied, “Although I am not quick to understand, I ask permission to devote myself to this teaching.” (12.1, translation modified)

顏淵問仁。子曰：「克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。為仁由己，而由人乎哉？」顏淵曰：「請問其目。」子曰：

「非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。」顏淵曰：「回雖不敏，請事斯語矣。」

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Zizhang asked about getting by in the world. The Master replied, “In your speech, be dutiful and trustworthy, and in your conduct be sincere and respectful. [...] When standing still, visualize these principles standing by your side; when riding in your carriage, see them resting before you on the crossbar. Only then will you get by in the world.” Zizhang then wrote these words on the end of his sash. (15.6)

子張問行。子曰：「言忠信，行篤敬，[...] 立，則見其參於前也；在輿，則見其倚於衡也。夫然後行。」子張書諸紳。

Ritual becomes a constant means of self-monitoring, a vehicle for self-development and also a very high ideal. Supposedly it means, on the one hand, an ever more graceful and perfect performing of the rites in the strict sense of the word, but on the other hand, it also develops a feeling of flow that one should strive to attain in every life-situation. By perfecting the rites in the narrow sense, Confucius’ follower refines their psycho-somatic capacities and learns to become “empty”; then they extend this attitude to all of the existence. As we said, the feeling of ease and joy that it brings is also immediately rewarding, not to mention its generally positive effects on one’s social interactions.

Conclusion

In this article I argued that the Embodiment Theory (ET) could help us understand some critical aspects of the Chinese tradition in general and of the *Analects* in particular. I brought out several important topics of ET in the *Analects*: embodiment, embeddedness, enactment, extendedness, emotivity, implicitness, emergence, joy and self-cultivation. Arguably the abundance of

examples suggests that those topics were also important in the *Analects*, and that ET could be used as a useful framework for interpreting the *Analects*. This article focused on the *Analects*, but it must be said that similar examples can easily be found in most of the Chinese philosophical texts. Contemporary ET formed quite recently, and largely as a critique of the former dominant Western understanding of knowledge, but as we can see, its central topics were discussed early on in the Chinese tradition. Due to the more or less continuous development of this tradition over two and a half millennia, a large body of philosophical texts has accumulated that could be useful for the development of ET itself, on the condition that its proponents become more aware of similar ideas in the Chinese tradition.

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David BARTOSCH

Explicit and Implicit Aspects of Confucian Education

Abstract

This essay provides a philosophical reflection on key elements of pre-modern Confucian learning. The topic is developed by presenting essential elements across the spectrum from explicit, linguistically expressible knowledge to symbolic aspects, as well as the philosophical problem of ineffable knowing. The investigation begins with the general conception of humanity underlying mainstream Confucian learning. Building on this, the more explicit content and explicable subjects or branches of classical Confucian learning are mapped out. This becomes the foundation for reflecting on a more symbolic, second layer of Confucian pedagogy, which leads to the core level of Confucian learning and the problem of ineffability. The present chapter references important classical passages and some ideas of Wang Yangming.

Keywords: Confucian learning, *ren* 仁 (“inter-humaneness”), explicit knowledge, implicit knowing, ineffability, Confucian classical literature, Wang Yangming

As a Starting Point: A General Confucian Conception of Humanity¹

In the *Liji* 禮記, a human being is defined as *tian-di zhi xin* 天地之心 (“heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth”).² In the case of Confucian learning, the centrality of man does not mean a fixed “acquis”, let alone a formal designation of a central characteristic of something like an eternal substance (much less in a sense assimilable to that of traditions of Aristotelian descent or other comparable traditions of philosophical thought). From the original Confucian perspective, to speak of the centrality of humanity first and foremost means a practical obligation. Among other things, this is also expressed in the context of Wang Yangming’s (王陽明, 1472–1529) discussions on “*zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一” (“knowing and action, together as one”).³ To understand and internalize the Confucian endeavour properly, our actions have to align with this obligation in each and every possible situation of our lives:

Human – from time immemorial, this (word) means the excellence of *tian-di* 天地 (“Heaven-and-Earth”), the crossing of *yin-yang* 陰陽, the convergence of (Earthly) ghosts and (Heavenly) spirits, the refined *qi* 氣 of the *wu xing* 五行 (“five phases”). [...] That is why the human being is the heart-mind of Heaven and Earth, the foundation of the five phases.⁴

1 This text is a revised version of an essay from 2017. While the content and structure remain unchanged, the text has been revised in terms of expression and any remaining errors. The translation of Chinese terms and passages has also been revised. The original version was my first publication in English. This stylistic revision aims to present the argument more clearly and accessibly. Unless stated otherwise, the translations and insertions in quotations within square brackets in this text are mine.

2 See the first quotation in the running text below.

3 See also, for example, Wang (1933b, 38–39): “必有欲行之心・然後知路・即是意・即是行之始矣・” “[To know] one has to have a heart-mind which is eager to take action. After that, one knows the path. That (eagerness) is *yi* 意 (‘willing’) and this is already the beginning of action.”] Regarding further extensive analysis concerning *zhi-xing he yi*, see Bartosch (2015, 520–590). With regard to Wang Yangming, the German-French philosopher Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) once remarked: “Concerning the implementation of the idea that trueness is an experience in which cognition and action are involved with one another in a mysterious way, Wang Yangming is truly a consummator of the teachings of Confucius and Mengzi.” (Schweitzer 2002, 275)

4 *Liji* 禮記, “*Liyun* 禮運”, 20: “故人者,其天地之德,陰陽之交,鬼神之會,五行之秀氣也。[...] 故人者,天地之心也,五行之端也,[...]”

The “heartness” of *ren* 人 (“human”⁵), namely as the convergence and centre of *tian-di* 天地, is only real inasmuch as it is permanently *realized* through one’s own actions. Wang Yangming later described this as the basis of the learning of the *sheng ren* 聖人 (my translation: “sagely human”). By following the directionality of his innate and unceasing *liang zhi* 良知 (my translation: “good-knowing”) permanently and freely, the human being is able to realize that “Heaven-and-Earth cannot appear as Heaven-and-Earth without (every) human’s *liang zhi*: Heaven-and-Earth (and) the ten thousand things form one *ti* 體 (“generative whole”⁶) with the human being.”⁷

To exemplify (this), (we can talk about) the body of a human being: The eyes see, the ears hear, the hands grasp, the feet walk. (They all) contribute to the (living) functioning of (this) body as a whole. The eyes are not embarrassed about themselves (for) not (being able to) hear. But (when) the ears notice something, the eyes will necessarily turn toward where (the sound is coming from). The hands are not embarrassed about themselves not (being able to) grasp. But (when) the hand is reaching for something, the feet by necessity are moving there (with it). Under the surface, its source *qi* is operating everywhere (in this body) in the same way. And blood and veins show no impairment. Thus, (we can say that) if one is troubled by an itching or one is out of breath, a (reciprocal) reaction of our thoughts and emotions is taking place in a mysterious way. We have no words for it, and yet its miraculous mysteriousness can be noticed. That is why [in the wider sense] the learning of the *sheng ren* [sagely human] is very simple and extremely accessible; (it is) easy to know and simple to follow. The learning is easy; competences and skills are easy to obtain. (It is) just (about) sincerely matching the great goal, that is, to remain in the primordial state of *xinti* 心體 (the “heart-mind’s generative whole”) – (which is)

- 5 This general translation is due to the more generalizing philosophical nature of this essay. And it is related to the above cited passage of the *Liji* and the use of the word in the context of the thought of Wang Yangming. The author is conscious of the fact that with regard to different classical authors as well as regarding each of these cases separately, *ren* 人 might also be translated more specifically and divergently. On this subject, the author thanks Prof. Dr Wolfgang Kubin for some insightful talks at Beijing Foreign Studies University back in 2017.
- 6 This has often been translated as “body”, but I think that the expression “generative whole” is more fitting because it presents us with a more conceptual meaning than “body” (which sounds more metaphorical).
- 7 Wang (1933c, 17): “天地無人的良知・亦不可為天地矣・蓋天地萬物・與人原是一體・”; see also my German translation in Bartosch (2015b, 157).

equality. Extensive knowledge [e.g., in the sense of Zhu Xi's programme of *gewu* 格物 ("investigation of things")] and technical abilities have no place in this teaching.⁸

Seen from this angle, the foundational level of human consciousness might best be understood as an integrated state of intuitive spontaneity which is constantly in accord with the situational changes of what premodern Neo-Confucians defined as *li* 理 (my translation: "principle of patterning"). This kind of an integrated spontaneity is to be thought of as something which (as a form of naturally "knowing-in-action"⁹) always *lives through* one's own actions while being permanently directed from *ren* 仁 (my translation: "inter-humaneness"¹⁰) and growing out of the fundamental interrelatedness of all humans and living beings. In this sense, it is to be understood as the basic condition as well as the main agent of the fountainhead of every living existence.

Accordingly, Confucius already sowed some important seeds for the later discussions. In the *Lunyu* 論語, he states: "Man is born for uprightness."¹¹ Here, the idea of an *inborn or innate completeness of the human being* is already foreshadowed.¹² As recorded in the *Liji* 禮記:

I heard from Zengzi what [Zengzi] had heard the Master say: "That which Heaven produces (and grows) and that which Earth (gives birth to) and raises – none (of it is) as great as the human being." To be given life

8 Wang (1933b, 51): "譬之一人之身・目視耳聽・手持足行・以濟一身之用・目不恥其無聰・而耳之所涉・目必營焉・足不恥其無執・而手之所探・足必前焉・蓋其元氣充同・血脈腠暢・是以癢癢呼吸・感觸神應・有不言而喻之妙・此聖人之學所以至易至簡・易知易從・學易能而才易成者・正以大端惟在復心體之同然・而知識技能・非所與論也・"; see also my German translation in Bartosch (2015b, 530–531).

9 This term is used here in a transferred sense with regard to Wang Yangming's "*zhi-xing he yi*". Regarding the origin of the expression "knowing-in-action", see Neuweg (2005, 582–3).

10 I am translating "*ren*" as "inter-humaneness", because the classical translations by Legge and others, such as "benevolence" or "humaneness", do not address the above-stated fact (see running text) that humaneness is not to be thought of as the actuality of an individual character trait, but as naturally "growing out" of the human interrelationships into which the individual human personality is born. This point of view holds true at least for the mainstream Confucians who followed thinkers like Mengzi, Zhu Xi, or Wang Yangming. Translating *ren* by using, for example, the expression "humaneness" tends to "veil" the interrelational nature of this humaneness. Therefore, I have used "inter-humaneness" here. One could also say that it more explicitly represents the "二" (two) in "仁".

11 *Lunyu* 論語, "Yongye 雍也", 19: "人之生也直。" (Trans. Legge).

12 Cf. also the discussion in Reich and Wei (1997, 39–40).

whole by one's parents and to return (oneself) wholly to them – this can be called *xiao* 孝 (my translation: “filial love-and-duty”¹³).¹⁴

More explicitly, the *innate* goodness of the human being was highlighted as the starting point and central theme of Confucian education by Mengzi 孟子, and later by such great proponents as Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Wang Yangming. Mengzi remarks: “To desire to be honoured is the common [heart-]mind of men. And all men have in themselves that which is truly honourable. Only they do not think of it.”¹⁵

In this sense, every human consciousness is born into unique, personal, and ever-evolving constellations and patterns of the process of their existence with a *common* obligation: from their mother's womb, every person is centred in between Heaven-and-Earth like a promising seed.¹⁶ In this figurative sense, every individual manifestation of human consciousness (to be understood as a unique relation of general humanity in time and space) exists in a way of being enabled to permanently grow within an indispensable network of human and extra-human relations. In accordance with Wang Yangming's famous core tenet *zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一 (“knowing and action, together as one”), this constant unfolding or realization of human consciousness (in and of itself) should be understood as a natural process through which the human being can be characterized as the heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth (*tian-di*) – not as a mere theoretical abstraction resulting from action, but *as* realizing and *doing* things in a state of an undivided (and yet itself differentiating) attentiveness. This state accords with a dynamic harmony of all relations within the whole process of Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand things:

The heart-mind of the *sheng ren* resembles a clear and bright mirror: (It is) simply clear brightness. Then, by following (what is) sensed and responding, there is nothing it does not reflect. There are no previous images still remaining within it. (And) there are no images yet to be mirrored present within it in advance.¹⁷

13 The original translation using “piety” has been much criticized. I am using the special expression “love-and-duty” instead.

14 *Liji* 禮記, “Jiyi 祭義”, 29: “吾聞諸曾子,曾子聞諸夫子曰:『天之所生,地之所養,無人為大。』父母全而生之,子全而歸之,可謂孝矣。”

15 *Mengzi* 孟子, “Gaozi shang 告子上”, 17: “欲貴者,人之同心也。人人有貴於己者,弗思耳。” (Trans. Legge).

16 This is an allusion to the following passage in *Lunyu* 論語, “Zi han 子罕”, 22: “子曰:「苗而不秀者有矣夫!秀而不實者有矣夫!」” [“The Master said, ‘There are cases in which the blade springs, but the plant does not go on to flower! There are cases where it flowers but no fruit is subsequently produced!’” (Trans. Legge).]

17 Wang (1933a, 11): “聖人之心如明鏡・只是一箇明・則隨感而應・無物不照・未有已往之形尚在・未照之形先具者・”; see also my German translation in Bartosch (2015, 99).

In this state, the student experiences the meaning expressed by Wang Yang-ming in the following statement: “The heart-mind (*xin* 心) is (inextricably one with) the principle of patterning (*li* 理). Could there be anything under Heaven outside of *xin*, or any *li* outside of *xin*?”¹⁸

On the other hand, a human being is not a puppet of *dao* 道 but retains the constant freedom to either embrace or reject the Way. Human existence inherits the potential to do evil and the capacity to choose the wrong path. An individual may decide to “walk” where they should not – specifically, the wrong path of their own implicit “belittlement”. Either unconsciously or even consciously, one may choose to act in the state of a *xiaoren* 小人 (“self-belittling human being”).¹⁹

Wang Yangming defines this condition as a state of *zisizili* 自私自利 (“selfish desires”). He sees it as the sole root of all human evil.²⁰ Moreover, evil does not dwell in solitude; the neglect of *ren* or *dao* (in the Confucian sense of a self-induced “belittlement”) naturally comes with consequences, which always seem to expand their reach. Human consciousness is not separate from everything else. The negative path of egoism inevitably affects the self in its social and environmental embeddedness. As a consequence, it furthers a destructive and self-damaging potential for everything that the turbid *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”) of the *xiaoren* comes into contact with. This is especially the case if such a person’s social function is that of a decision-maker (like a politician, manager, general, etc.).

Consequently, Confucian education and (constant) training were established as a way to *safeguard* humankind – or at least the ruling administrative elites – against this road of a self-induced decline and dehumanization. For two and a half millennia, adherents of the *Rujia* 儒家 (“Confucian school(s)”) have discussed, reflected upon, and practised ways of swimming against the stream of those gnawing and corrosive forces of humanity’s self-disintegration. Although their methodological views differ in many respects, all of them share the same motivation: striving for the right way to become fully human, thereby redeeming humanity’s great promise of being the heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth (*tian-di zhi xin*).

18 Ibid., 2: “心即理也。天下又有心外之事。心外之理乎。”; see also my German translation in Bartosch (2015b, 177, footnote 185).

19 See my analysis in Bartosch (2015b, 679–706). This chapter also contains some transcultural (comparative) remarks regarding the Christian tradition (Master Eckhart, Nicolaus Cusanus).

20 See the last footnote above.

In this context, it is important to remember that in Confucianism *a human being is not seen as a creature*.²¹ This means humans are not viewed as individual creations in the context of a cosmic *creatio continua*, to use a word from the context of Medieval Christian philosophy in the transferred sense here. Humans do not depend on a personal, supra-human force of creation akin to a creator (or *Deus, unum*, etc.). On the contrary, in historical Confucian schools, such as *Xinxue* 心學 (“Learning of the Heart-Mind”), each human being and humanity as a whole are comprehended as the central living and self-reflecting aspect (i.e., the *xin* 心 “heart-mind”) of Heaven-and-Earth – without the need for a personal creator (principle) “above”. Ideally, this central “anthropocosmic”²² aspect, or *tian-di zhi xin* 天地之心 (“heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth”),²³ should *generate itself* in concert with the autopoietic transformations of the universal whole. Consequently, Confucians reject the notion or the hope regarding a divine or Heaven-sent saviour or messiah who intervenes on behalf of humanity. *There is no saviour of humanity but humanity itself*.²⁴

For a Confucian, no religiously connoted consolation is available; and neither “paradise” nor “hell” awaits humans beyond what they may create during their lifetimes within the varying contexts of their social surroundings and through all the specific situations of their unique life experiences. Concerning death, the only possible “remuneration” for which an individual human can hope might be a feeling of satisfaction that, at least, the continuation of the family is possible and that one’s right deeds may help provide stability for one’s descendants, as well as for other people and future generations in general.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to contribute to a dynamic and flexible equilibrium of the social relationships among one’s family members, as well as to the stability of the state in which one lives. In this regard, the only true and lasting “salvation” of humanity lies *in persistent learning and teaching*, as well as moral training and reciprocal self-cultivation:

However fine the viands be, if one does not eat, he does not know their taste; however perfect the course may be, if one does not learn it, he

21 See my comparison of the philosophies of Nicolaus Cusanus and Wang Yangming in this regard in Bartosch (2015b, 25–122, the chapter “Kreativität” [“Creativity”]).

22 Tu (1973, 202).

23 See above, the first citation in this essay and the footnote with the source text there.

24 At least in this regard, we ought not abandon hope when taking matters concerning humanity in our own hands from a Confucian perspective.

does not know its goodness. Therefore, when he learns, one knows his own deficiencies; when he teaches, he knows the difficulties of learning. After he knows his deficiencies, one is able to turn around and examine himself; after he knows the difficulties, he is able to stimulate himself to effort. Hence it is said, “Teaching and learning help each other”, as it is said in [*Duiming* 兌命], “Teaching is half of learning”.²⁵

Within the Confucian sphere of influence, it was not a religion or some other kind of dogmatic belief system which became the prime mover of civilization; in China and some of its neighbouring lands, learning, education and the path of spontaneous insights into general wisdom became the forces that bound (and continue to bind) together many important aspects of society:

The jade uncut will not form a vessel for use; and if men do not learn, they do not know the way (in which they should go). On this account the ancient kings, when establishing states and governing the people, made instruction and schools a primary object; as it is said in [*Duiming*], “The thoughts from first to last should be fixed on learning”.²⁶

For a human being to fulfil humanity’s obligation as *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”) of Heaven-and-Earth, it is necessary to prevent human society from descending into chaos. Therefore, the people have to be provided with special ways of learning that will enable them to keep the heart-mind in a permanent state of realizing itself through permanent communion with others, as well as with *tian-di wan wu* 天地萬物 (“Heaven-and-Earth and the ten thousand things”) in general. These methods of learning should aid in the reflection and realization of the people’s full dignity as *tian-di zhi xin* 天地之心 (“heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth”). From a Confucian perspective, every kind of learning that does not fit this goal of achieving one’s innermost (inter-)human(e) completeness would have to be labelled pointless.

25 *Liji* 禮記, “Xueji 學記”, 3: “雖有嘉肴, 弗食, 不知其旨也; 雖有至道, 弗學, 不知其善也。故學然後知不足, 教然後知困。知不足, 然後能自反也; 知困, 然後能自強也, 故曰: 教學相長也。《兌命》曰: 「學學半。」其此之謂乎!” (Trans. Legge, with some changes to the punctuation by DB).

26 *Ibid.*, “Xueji 學記”, 2: “玉不琢, 不成器; 人不學, 不知道。是故古之王者建國君民, 教學為先。《兌命》曰「念終始典于學。」其此之謂乎!” (Trans. Legge).

Explicit Knowing in Confucian Learning: Subjects and Modalities

But how is humanity's innate goodness – or, to use the term popularized by Wang Yangming, *liang zhi* 良知 (“good-knowing”) – to be nourished and cultivated? To begin, it is evident that humans must learn basic skills and techniques that provide them with the means necessary to create a civilized state of human existence. In the present paper, this kind of knowledge or know-how is referred to as *explicit knowledge* (of Confucian learning). In this context, we must bear in mind that although this kind of knowledge seems to be in the foreground, it ultimately functions as a kind of “user surface” that contains – and in some respects more or less “overlays” – deeper aspects of Confucian learning.²⁷

Starting with the “outer layer” of Confucian learning, it can be said that although Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) is generally known as a “moral teacher”, he did not neglect to integrate objective knowledge into his way of learning. In the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*), for example, he emphasizes in one passage the value of the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Odes*) also for the particular reason that one can learn much about animals and plants in that work.²⁸ Such forms of explicit knowledge (or know-how) can also be understood as explicit contents of Confucian education. Moreover, not unjustifiably, Wang Yangming has been criticized for appearing to diminish this aspect of the original Confucian teachings with his focus on action and situational engagement, so to speak. With regard to the modern environment, but also to potential ways to reconcile the positions of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming with regard

27 In a wider sense, the explicit knowledge within Confucian learning must be understood as some “apparitional circumference” (as one might call it) of a wisdom that “shines through” all of these necessary fields of knowledge and skills taught at school in a much more subtle or *implicit* sense. With regard to Confucianism, explicit forms of knowledge must be understood as a kind of impetus for a deeper kind of learning, the goal of which is becoming a decent human being. The explicit content and subject matter of ancient Confucian learning can also be comprehended as an integral part of the whole “body” of (interpersonal) human existence and reflection.

28 See *Lunyu* 論語, “Yang Huo 陽貨”, 9: “多識於鳥獸草木之名。” In my opinion, this opens up the tradition of Confucian learning as a practice of personal self-cultivation relevant to today's science-based environment. It implies that there is no contradiction in following the path of a modern Confucian while also being a natural scientist. Besides that, one can find many examples of pre-modern Confucian scholars who have done marvellous scientific work (in the sense of the pre-modern Chinese contexts). The famous prince Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 (1536–1610), for example, combined music, physics, mathematics, and astronomy in a very scientific manner.

to *gewu* 格物 (“investigation of things”) in the future, this aspect of original Confucian learning in regard to explicit knowledge should be acknowledged. Regarding present-day requirements, natural science – which is mainly based on the inseparable unity of knowledge (theories) and practice, namely experiments within the context of certain *experimental systems* as a combination of evolving knowledge and *experimental activities* and scientific communities – could easily be analysed in an *extended and modernized* framework based on the general idea of Yangming’s understanding of *zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一 (“knowing and action, together as one”).

In principle, it can be said that said explicit contents (Confucius’ knowledge about birds, etc.) can readily be articulated and taught, *because they are expressible in a systematic way*. Therefore, *explicit knowledge* might be understood as functionally equivalent to some teachable technical know-how, which is needed to sustain society, to balance human communities, or to improve our living conditions in general. In this sense, the explicit contents of Confucian learning were transmitted within contexts of comparatively mature educational systems very early on:

According to the system of ancient teaching, for the families of (a hamlet) there was the village school; for a neighbourhood there was the [*xiang* 庠]; for the larger districts there was the [*xu* 序]; and in the capitals there was the college [*xue* 學]. Every year some entered the college, and every second year there was a comparative examination. In the first year it was seen whether they could read the texts intelligently, and what was the meaning of each; in the third year, whether they were reverently attentive to their work, and what companionship was most pleasant to them; in the fifth year, how they extended their studies and sought the company of their teachers; in the seventh year, how they could discuss the subjects of their studies and select their friends. They were now said to have made some small attainments. In the ninth year, when they knew the different classes of subjects and had gained a general intelligence, were firmly established and would not fall back, they were said to have made grand attainments. After this the training was sufficient to transform the people, and to change (anything bad in) manners and customs. Those who lived near at hand submitted with delight, and those who were far off thought (of the teaching) with longing desire. Such was the method of the Great Learning; as is said in the Record, “The little ant continually exercises the art (of amassing)”.²⁹

29 *Liji* 禮記, “*Xueji* 學記”, 4: “古之教者, 家有塾, 黨有庠, 術有序, 國有學。比年入學, 中年考校。一年視離經辨志, 三年視敬業樂群, 五年視博習親師, 七年視論學取友, 謂之小成;

This leads us to the question of precisely which kinds of subjects or fields of study Confucius promoted. In fact, the Master identifies several fields of study. Writing and mathematics were seen as basic skills, or *Xiaoyi* 小藝 (“Learning of the Smaller Arts”). To these, Confucius added four additional subjects: poetry, history, ritual, and music. In my view, all of these subjects blend into each other as a sort of *holistic training*. Against this background, Confucius attaches great importance to activating his students’ abilities to reflect, act and grow independently. In this context, the followers of Confucius – probably much to the dismay of the master himself³⁰ – have stressed the importance of learning by rote, especially with regard to the content of the *Shijing* 詩經.³¹

My children, why do you not study the Book of [Odes]? The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one’s father, and the remoter one of serving one’s prince.³²

History was seen as important, because it helps one gain a good orientation in political practice; thus, one ought to learn from the past. In this spirit, “[t]he Master said, ‘A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old Peng.’”³³

Music was also to be practised on a regular basis. Its transformative power was emphasized, when “[t]he Master said, ‘It is by the Odes that the mind is aroused. It is by the Rules of Propriety that the character is established. It is from Music that the finish is received.’”³⁴ “For changing their manners and altering their customs, there is nothing better than music.”³⁵

九年知類通達，強立而不反，謂之大成。夫然後足以化民易俗，近者說服，而遠者懷之，此大學之道也。《記》曰：「蛾子時術之。」其此之謂乎！” (Trans. Legge).

30 See Tan (2014).

31 Rote learning has been an important element of premodern learning all around the world. Another example is presented by the classical educational culture of India. But also some great scientists of the 20th century were supporters of rote learning, such as Lorenz and Kreuzer (1988, 49).

32 *Lunyu* 論語, “Yang Huo 陽貨”, 9: “小子！何莫學夫詩？詩，可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。邇之事父，遠之事君。” (Trans. Legge).

33 *Ibid.*, “Shu Er 述而”, 1: “子曰：「述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。」” (Trans. Legge).

34 *Ibid.*, “Tai Bo 泰伯”, 8: “子曰：「興於詩，立於禮。成於樂。」” (Trans. Legge).

35 *Xiaojing* 孝經, “Guang Yaodao 廣要道”, 1: “移風易俗，莫善於樂。” (Trans. Legge).

Besides these skills and fields of knowledge,³⁶ Confucius also emphasized the importance of physical education. Hence, he introduced archery and chariot-eering as two additional subjects that his students were obliged to practise diligently. The idea behind this was that the personalities of the students should be shaped by these *specific forms of action*. The general background here was that “[f]rom the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of *everything besides*”.³⁷ Still today, East Asian cultures that have been influenced by Confucianism can be partly analysed with regard to this aspect of *xiu shen* 修身 (“cultivating (the somatic) character”) – which encompasses not only the ways of an individual human being, but also the social “community-characters” of groups of people in that context.

Finally, we can also draw from ancient Confucian teachings to learn something about the *foundational modalities of Confucian holistic learning*. A passage from the *Zhongyong* 中庸 sheds light on these foundational modalities of learning, which still have very inspiring potential with regard to current understandings of education. They are defined as follows: (1) *boxue* 博學 (“extensive study”), (2) *shenwen* 審問 (“accurate inquiry”), (3) *shensi* 慎思 (“careful reflection”), (4) *mingbian* 明辨 (“clear discrimination”), and (5) *duxing* 篤行 (“earnest practice”):

He who attains sincerity is he who chooses what is good, and firmly holds it fast. To this attainment there are requisite the extensive study of what is good, accurate inquiry about it, careful reflection on it, the clear discrimination of it, and the earnest practice of it. The superior man, while there is anything he has not studied, or while in what he has studied there is anything he cannot understand, will not interrupt his labour. While there is anything he has not inquired about, or anything in what he has inquired about which he does not know, he will not interrupt his labour. While there is anything which he has not reflected on, or anything in what he has reflected on which he does not apprehend, he will not interrupt his labour. While there is anything which he has not discriminated or his discrimination is not clear, he will not interrupt his labour. If there is anything which he has not practised, or his practice fails in earnestness, he will not interrupt his labour. If another man succeeds by one effort, he will use a hundred efforts. If another man succeeds by ten efforts, he will use a thousand. Let a man proceed in this

36 According to the *Xiaoxue* 小學, all of the aforementioned subjects were later subdivided into a plurality of minor subjects.

37 *Liji* 禮記, “Daxue 大學”, 2: “自天子以至於庶人,壹是皆以修身為本。” (Trans. Legge).

way, and, though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong.³⁸

The Crossing: *Ren* and Confucian *Bildung*

The above-mentioned skills and fields of knowledge, as well as the modalities of Confucian learning, might best be understood as an “outer layer” of the endeavour to become a *jünzi* 君子.³⁹ In the following, the attention is directed to some core aspects which are not so easy to convey – at least not theoretically. The reason for this is clear. To assist students in transforming themselves into better human beings, it is not enough to merely provide them with technical know-how or to teach them music or train them in other physical or martial arts (like archery or charioteering) devoid of deeper significance being attached to them. Self-cultivation is not merely a way of achieving the external recognition of others, but the (re)transformation of one’s whole personality in the direction of one’s aforementioned (universal) innate goodness.

The genuine nature of this Confucian *Bildung*⁴⁰ starts from the valuable insight that man is permanently woven into and woven out of an ever-changing

38 Ibid., “Zhongyong 中庸”, 22: “誠之者，擇善而固執之者也。博學之，審問之，慎思之，明辨之，篤行之。有弗學，學之弗能，弗措也；有弗問，問之弗知，弗措也；有弗思，思之弗得，弗措也；有弗辨，辨之弗明，弗措也，有弗行，行之弗篤，弗措也。人一能之己百之，人十能之己千之。果能此道矣，雖愚必明，雖柔必強。” (Trans. Legge).

39 The word is at least partly translatable into German as “(ein) Edler” or “(der) Edle”, which contains the possible meanings of the words “noble-minded”, “exquisite”, “gentle”, “generous”, “genteel”, “virtuous”, “lofty” (in a positive sense), and “gallant”. The word “(der) Edle” is akin to “Adel” (“nobility”), which has also been used in the sense of “Geistesadel” (“nobility of the mind”). The latter also overlaps with meanings of “noble spirit” or “spirit of nobility” but has a wider “halo” of meanings, so to speak. Overall, the translation of “*jünzi* 君子” remains a complex challenge.

40 During the 19th and 20th centuries, the discourse of German philosophy connected the word *Bildung* with criteria for an education that, in a certain sense, shows several similarities with the intent of Confucian learning. *Bildung* is a word that has no direct counterpart in the English language. At least until around the end of the 19th century, when the traditional German study system and the understanding of its philosophical background in the teachings of von Humboldt and others started to be gradually replaced by other principles (a process that took approximately another century), the word *Bildung* meant a process that transforms and activates the whole person, their mores and manners and skillfulness, while nourishing the self-reflexivity of the learner. In this sense, one might think of Germany’s famous writer, poet, scientist, and politician Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as a counterpart to the polymaths of Confucian learning and administration in China (those *truly* striving to live the life of a *jünzi* 君子). It might be in this regard that Goethe once wrote to a friend: “The Chinese people share many similarities with the Germans” (Eckermann 1982, 458).

web of (transpersonal) human relations. Every person is an internal relation of a living family system which, in turn, is integrated or embedded as an inherent relational manifestation of the dynamic macrocosmic overall-relation of *tian-di* 天地 (“Heaven-and-Earth”).

In this context, the enduring point of departure in all forms of human self-cultivation is reflected in the Confucian term “*ren* 仁”.

In a narrower sense, this term stands for the loving and caring relationship between a benevolent and caring father and a receiving, respectful, and filial son. For Confucians, this is the archetype for a humane interrelationship and for “inter-humaneness” (*ren* 仁). From a Confucian perspective, this key human(e) relationship is to be understood as the “gravitational centre” of all human civilization and cultivation.⁴¹

The son sees the father as a role model, while the father reflects on himself as a son in relation to his own father. From their respective fathers, the sons receive their basic human principles of conduct and their sense of a shared common decency. On that foundation, the fundamentals of human society should be kept alive and practised on a daily basis. In addition, the loving and caring meaning of *ren* 仁, in the sense of a reciprocal relationship of giving and taking, of teaching and being taught, is also valid regarding the relationship between an older and younger brother, between husband and wife, as well as between an older and younger friend – a connection which also marks the link between the family system and its surrounding sociological environment.

Traditionally, *ren* 仁 is also understood as a key principle defining the relationship between a ruler and minister. Last but not least, “*ren* 仁” is an important part of the word “*ren’ai* 仁爱” (“inter-humaneness (and) loving care”),⁴² which expresses how superiors should cultivate and regulate their environment and the well-being of their subordinates. Just as all families – in their basic human interrelatedness in the sense of *ren* 仁 – can be seen as the constituent cells of a community, the relationship between ruler and minister is to be understood as the foundational pillar of the political meta-structure. This institution is meant to centre all the actions of the people in a kind of organic and dynamic equilibrium as a whole. The relationship of ruler and minister in the field of governance and administration is analogous to the relationship of father and son.

41 Regarding Confucius’ one-sided focus on father, sons, and brothers, the common historical neglect of the female aspect is undoubtedly a limitation, leaving significant scope for future Confucian gender studies.

42 Regarding this term, cf. Chen (1991, 268–276).

At least ideally speaking, the difference, of course, lies in the fact that the relationship of ruler and minister should not be based on actual descent or family ties but should be determined exclusively by the worthiness of the subordinate administrator, while the superior should also be worthy of the leadership position. Similarly, at least in an ideal situation, the worthiest heir of the dynasty should be the next to ascend the throne. According to the meritocratic principles that became prevalent in Chinese “imperial management”, only the most learned and skilled men were to be entrusted with the administration of the country. Thus, in principle, only the worthiest “sons” of the realm were supposed to be granted such responsible posts.

Accordingly, the character of the ruler was also supposed to have been moulded by the practice of *xiao* 孝. As emperors (with no human superior), the rulers of *Zhongguo* 中國 were not only understood as simply the sons of their birth parents, but each was also seen as the “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi* 天子). They had to implement *tianming* 天命 (“Mandate of Heaven”). At least in the sense of an ideal, they were seen as the channel or conduit through which human society would be provided with omnipresent cosmic order and celestial harmony, connecting humanity as much as possible with the ways of Heaven and the ever-unfolding and permanently transforming order of *yi* 易 (“(universal) change(s)”).

In this context, one ought not forget that the imperial family itself was supposed to serve as an exemplar for all other families under Heaven. Some important passages in the *Daxue* 大學 reflect on this topic in the following sense:

What is meant by “In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family,” is this: It is not possible for one to teach others, while he cannot teach his own family. Therefore, the ruler, without going beyond his family, completes the lessons for the state. There is filial [love-and-duty] – therewith the sovereign should be served. There is fraternal submission – therewith elders and superiors should be served. There is kindness – therewith the multitude should be treated. [...] From one [imperial] family [realizing inter-humaneness] a whole state becomes [one realm of inter-humaneness], and from its courtesies the whole state becomes courteous while, from the ambition and perverseness of the One man, the whole state may be led to rebellious disorder. Such is the nature of the influence. This verifies the saying, “Affairs may be ruined by a single sentence; a kingdom may be settled by its One man.” [...] [W]hen the ruler, as a father, a son, and a brother, is a model, then the people

imitate him. This is what is meant by saying, “The government of his kingdom depends on his regulation of the family.”⁴³

We therefore see that the innate goodness of man has to be cultivated within *at least* two different spheres, which are inseparably intertwined. The first environment of Confucian learning is the family; the second is the social environment of human coexistence. In addition to this, the aforementioned bond between older and younger friends might then be understood as a third sphere for cultivating one’s innate human goodness. One need only consider the reciprocal relationships of Confucius and his disciples to see that the relationship of teacher and pupil was also originally understood as being based on friendship. A person who integrates all three spheres in their personal self-cultivation and strives to extend their learning to the utmost degree is characterized as a *junzi*.

If we analyse the core principles of Confucian ways of teaching how to live a life that expresses the true foundations of human nature in the abovesaid sense, we can see that a very substantial task in this context lies in the stimulation of the innate *xiao* 孝 and the nurture of the all-encompassing practice of *ren* 仁. Starting with the closest relatives, *ren* is supposed to be extended to become the sole basis and framework for regulating all possible human relations and situations. In this regard, it is Wang Yangming who states:

Therefore, (when I) love (*qin* 親) my father as well as the fathers (of other) people, extending this to the fathers (of all) people under Heaven, then my humanity truly joins with my father, the fathers (of other) people, and the fathers of all people under Heaven to form one generative whole (together with all of them). This true togetherness of forming one generative whole results in the brightening of the clear virtue of filial love-and-duty.

When I love my older brother and the older brothers (of other) people, extending this to the older brothers (of all) people under Heaven, then my humanity truly joins with my older brother, the older brothers (of other) people, as well as the older brothers of all people under Heaven, and it forms one generative whole (together with all of them). This true togetherness of forming one generative whole (with all) is followed by

43 *Liji* 禮記, “Daxue 大學”, 11: “所謂治國必先齊其家者, 其家不可教而能教人者, 無之。故君子不出家而成教於國: 孝者, 所以事君也; 弟者, 所以事長也; 慈者, 所以使眾也。[...] 一家仁, 一國興仁; 一家讓, 一國興讓; 一人貪戾, 一國作亂。其機如此。此謂一言僨事, 一人定國。[...] 其為父子兄弟足法, 而後民法之也。此謂治國在齊其家。” (Trans. Legge).

the brightening of the clear virtue of brotherly respect and love. Ruler and minister, husband and wife, friends – and extending even to mountains and rivers, ghosts and spirits, birds and beasts, grass and trees – there is nothing which would not be loved (like kin) in order to attain the (unbound) inter-humaneness of myself forming one generative whole (with Heaven, Earth and the ten thousand things). Only then there is nothing that would not be brightened in (the light of) my clear virtue, and the one generative whole of Heaven, Earth and the ten thousand things can truly be realized in this way.⁴⁴

We should also recall what Confucius himself points out: “*Xiao* [“filial love-and-duty”] is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which (all moral) teaching is growing.”⁴⁵

In this context, Confucius emphasizes the ruler’s responsibility not only for the well-being of his subjects but also for a form of public education that achieves the goal of realizing *ren* 仁 throughout the entire human community. Therefore, in the *Lunyu*, we find the following famous passage:

When the Master went to Wei, [Ran You 冉有] acted as driver of his carriage. The Master observed, “How numerous are the people!” You said, “Since they are thus numerous, what more shall be done for them?” “Enrich them,” was the reply. “And when they have been enriched, what more shall be done?” The Master said, “Teach them.”⁴⁶

Through the process of educating the people and raising worthy citizens for the administration of the state and the common good, the ruler must also act as a role model. In this sense, he should be capable of acting as the ideal teacher. He ought to embody virtue to assist his people in the never-ending struggle for the realization of *ren* 仁. Therefore, it is emphasized:

These were the words of the Master – Difficult is it to attain to what is called the perfect humanity of the superior man! It is said in the *Book of*

44 Wang (1933d, 36–37): “是故親吾之父・以及人之父・以及天下人之父・而後吾之仁實與吾之父人之父與天下人之父而為一體矣・實與之為一體・而後孝之明德始明矣・親吾之兄・以及人之兄・以及天下人之兄・而後吾之仁實與吾之兄人之兄與天下人之兄而為一體矣・實與之為一體・而後弟之明德始明矣・君臣也・夫婦也・朋友也・以至於山川鬼神鳥獸草木也・莫不實有以親之・以達吾一體之仁・然後吾之明德始無不明・而真能以天地萬物為一體矣・”

45 *Xiaojing* 孝經, “Kaizongmingyi 開宗明義”, 1: “夫孝,德之本也,教之所由生也。” (Trans. Legge).

46 *Lunyu* 論語, “Zi Lu 子路”, 9: “子適衛,冉有僕。子曰:「庶矣哉!」冉有曰:「既庶矣。又何加焉?」曰:「富之。」曰:「既富矣,又何加焉?」曰:「教之。」” (Trans. Legge).

[*Odes*], “The happy and courteous prince is the father and mother of his people.” Happy, he (yet) vigorously teaches them; courteous, he makes them pleased and restful. With all their happiness, there is no wild extravagance; with all their observance of ceremonial usages, there is the feeling of affection. Notwithstanding his awing gravity, they are restful; notwithstanding his son-like gentleness, they are respectful. Thus he causes them to honour him as their father, and love him as their mother. There must be all this before he is the father and mother of his people. Could anyone who was not possessed of perfect virtue be able to accomplish this?⁴⁷

In a transferred, broader sense, this also applies to *every* Confucian teacher in his relations to his students. The personality of the teacher is extremely important. Beyond the mere content of his teaching, a Confucian teacher is also supposed to serve as a role model. As mentioned earlier, this is especially the case when it comes to educating future leaders and political administrators. In the *Lunyu*, Confucius therefore states with regard to the outcome of such an education: “(If) his self (is) upright, things will proceed (properly) without commands.”⁴⁸

Confucius felt responsible for the learning of more than 3,000 students. Through his actions, he *exemplified* the practice of empathy – thereby didactically mediating one of the root principles of his teaching *without relying on words*. In the *Lunyu*, we find the following passage: “When the Master was eating by the side of a mourner, he never ate to the full.”⁴⁹ Confucius even taught empathy with respect to the animal kingdom.⁵⁰

Based on this practice of empathy, Confucius was also able to see into the personal characteristics of each of his students. In the *Lunyu*, he states: “See what a man does. Mark his motives. Examine in what things he rests. How can a man conceal his character? How can a man conceal his character?”⁵¹

In his actual teaching practice, Confucius often draws on real situations from everyday life which then serve as valuable examples of certain *general*

47 *Liji* 禮記, “Biaoji 表記”, 26: “子言之: 「君子之所謂仁者其難乎! 《詩》云: 『凱弟君子, 民之父母。』 凱以強教之; 弟以說安之。樂而毋荒, 有禮而親, 威莊而安, 孝慈而敬。使民有父之尊, 有母之親。如此而後可以為民父母矣, 非至德其孰能如此乎? ” (Trans. Legge).

48 *Lunyu* 論語, “Zi Lu 子路”, 6: “「其身正, 不令而行; [...]。 ”

49 *Lunyu* 論語, “Shu Er 述而”, 9: “子食於有喪者之側, 未嘗飽也。 ” (Trans. Legge).

50 See Bartosch (2015a).

51 *Lunyu* 論語, “Wei Zheng 為政”, 10: “「視其所以, 觀其所由, 察其所安。人焉廋哉? 」 ” (Trans. Legge).

insights derived from specific situations. On one occasion, when the Master sees a bird-catcher who is intentionally catching only young sparrows, he asks the man why he does not try to catch any old birds. The bird-catcher's answer is quite insightful: "The old sparrow is very smart, that is why he is hard to catch. The young ones are only desperate for food. For this reason, they are easy to catch." The Master then addresses his students and, among other considerations, draws the following comparison:

Did you listen? [...] The fortune or misfortune of the sparrow depends on whom he follows: [...] If one follows the prudence of an elder, one has the ladder to self-preservation. If one follows the ideas of the inexperienced youth, one easily encounters danger and death.⁵²

This alludes to another well-known characteristic of Confucian learning, which projects the role of the caring father onto that of the elder teacher providing guidance for the young – who venerate and follow him for that reason.

55

Implicit Knowing in Confucian Education: The Ineffable Centre

At this stage of the investigation, it has to be emphasized again that all the aforementioned subjects and practices were not intended merely to teach the students some practical skills, knowledge, or some techniques in the sense of "art for art's sake". Even regarding the explicit content of learning, the underlying intention is always implicitly two-fold. Much like Confucius' method of drawing his pupils' attention to actual situations of everyday life, drawing conclusions by analogy (like the analogy between the behaviour of sparrows and humans in the last quote), *all* of the practices, subjects, and contents of explicit learning implicitly refer, in a *symbolic sense*, to an *ineffable* aspect of Confucian teaching. This entails insights and understandings which cannot be conveyed or transmitted with words. The knowing that is to be aroused by the teacher cannot be conveyed like the characteristics of a physical object, the steps of a technical process, or the mere technical aspects of an art (e.g., the know-how of holding the writing-brush properly or how to shoot an arrow with a bow). The difficult part is that the student *has to realize this symbolic dimension of learning* through his own efforts.

52 Cf. the whole passage in *Confucius Jiayu* 孔子家語, "Liu Ben 六本", 7: "孔子見羅雀者,所得皆黃口小雀。夫子問之曰:「大雀獨不得,何也?」羅者曰:「大雀善驚而難得,黃口貪食而易得。黃口從大雀,則不得;大雀從黃口,亦不得。」孔子顧謂弟子曰:「善驚以遠害,利食而忘患,自其心矣,而獨以所從為禍福。故君子慎其所從。以長者之慮,則有全身之階;隨小者之趨,而有危亡之敗也。」"

Symbolic meaning, as an underlying implicit dimension of the explicit meaning of possible knowledge content, *is not precise*; it transcends the boundaries of fixed notions. It always remains open for further personal development and *must be cultivated* practically and regularly until it becomes permanent and takes root in the all-encompassing fountainhead of one's *xin* 心 ("heart-mind"). By *practising* the art of charioteering, for example, the student opens a way for himself to potentially grasp the underlying symbolic meaning of this activity (a meaning which cannot be finalized and which is permanently enriching itself). In this sense of a *symbolic practice* of learning, the *practice* of charioteering implicitly helps the learner understand how to always attentively follow the right road or right path in life (especially in, metaphorically speaking, "uneven" and difficult social "terrain" in the context of a leading position).

56

Here we touch upon the preliminary aspects of a topic concerning a more hidden, but rather *central*, issue. Confucius tries to navigate this matter throughout his teachings. In my opinion, *all* of Confucius's sayings contain an underlying level of deeper symbolic meaning. In this regard, something is always left unspoken, thereby pointing to a level of wisdom, to an inexpressible dimension of understanding – a dimension which cannot be conclusively articulated. Although this level of wisdom and achievement might be alluded to from different angles, it remains inexpressible in its entirety or totality. In brief, it confronts us with the philosophical problem of *ineffability*.

From a transcultural comparative perspective, this might be likened to certain aspects of education, for example, in late "pagan" Neo-Platonism. In this context, the student was required to master several branches of philosophical learning (metaphysics, ethics, psychology, etc.). The unified processing of these branches of learning was meant to culminate in an experience of a fundamental understanding or "enlightenment" – a universal understanding which cannot be adequately conveyed through words, as already the author of the famous Platonic *Seventh Letter* (originally ascribed to Plato) explained, early on.⁵³ At least in the sense of a partial analogy, the branches of explicit learning in Confucianism also lead back to a hidden centre of wisdom. Wang Yangming hints at this in one of his poems, when he states: "Every human heart-mind holds a Zhong Ni (Confucius)."⁵⁴

53 See also Edelstein (1966, 100): "But to be sure, such a vision is not a vision of ordinary experience or thought. Unlike such experiences or thoughts, it can, the letter holds, not be expressed in words. It also falls within the province of a specially gifted soul. 'Neither receptivity or memory can ever help him who is not kindred to the object [to see it], for it does not arise to start with in alien states [of the soul]'" (344 A)."

54 Wang (1933d, 128): "個個人心有仲尼 · "

To be able to reflect on this issue more clearly, one can visualize the branches of the *liu yi* 六藝 (“Six Arts”) in the form of a six-pointed star resembling a snowflake, with smaller offshoots on the branches of the crystal, symbolically representing the corresponding subdivisions of each of the Six Arts. The ineffable aspect of Confucian learning symbolically occupies the centre of this “snowflake” or “six-pointed star”. The centre is the seventh aspect – in which all six branches are rooted and ultimately coincide.

The significant distinction between *early* Confucianism and traditions such as West Eurasian Neoplatonism is that the problem of ineffability is not connected to any metaphysical issues (in a possible Western sense of “metaphysics”). Instead, Confucius keeps his attention mainly focused on the moral fountainhead and on the social life of humanity. He strives for the betterment of humankind without looking for any remedies outside of its foundation in “inter-humaneness” (*ren* 仁). This is rather distinctive and keeps his method of self-perfection focused on the human being. Confucians were consequently in the favourable situation of not being susceptible to getting lost in mental visions or abstract forms of religious mythology of any sort, let alone any form of distracting theological dispute⁵⁵ – which also became an important trait in the evolution of the Confucian administrative tradition.

In this favourable and unique sense (which does not deny the court rituals and the underlying glimpses of ancient spiritual worldviews, but maintains a more or less agnostic position with regard to the ultimate questions), the unspeakable process of *dao* 道 cannot be conceptualized as such. Yet, it can be realized indirectly (and only situationally) through the indicative allusions of the Master (who himself already dwells in – or as – the limitless processuality and oneness of *dao*). Notably, Confucius and other great Confucian thinkers, such as Wang Yangming, did not define or explain what *dao* “is”. Unlike Socrates, Plato, and others in ancient Greece, they did not pursue a *theoretical* path regarding the key terms they used. Any such approaches in *modern Confucian philosophy* of the 20th and 21st centuries are influenced by the reading of Western philosophers, such as Kant, or by the philosophical classics of Greek antiquity, and others. The words “theoretical” and “theory” point to a very different origin from that of Confucian thought and its unique enlightening or pedagogical function.⁵⁶ Confucius himself did not seek to

55 For a transcultural comparison which deals with the philosophical problem of ineffability in Neo-Platonism and Neo-Confucianism, cf. Bartosch (2015b, 233–300).

56 There is not sufficient space left in the present text to address this important issue in greater detail. For a supplementary reference, please consult my extensive and partly comparative analysis on the topic with regard to Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideas, as well as other notions

create abstract meanings which were then intended to be transcended into “higher” intellectual spheres of self-reflection. Such practices would have been meaningless within these *earlier* pre-modern Confucian circumstances.

Instead, pre-modern Confucian teachers employed language in a varying and therefore always contextualizing manner (i.e., in accord with the individual situations and unique (inter)personal circumstances of their respective students). This is because *they always used their speech to guide the conduct of their students*.⁵⁷ The Confucian situational use of terms might best be understood as the use of semantic “pointers” or “pointing-rods” (akin to Max Scheler’s (1874–1928) concept of “*Zeigestäbe*”). This method simply consists of semantically *pointing out* (or *pointing towards*) the right “direction” in the context of a situation. In the Ming-dynasty context of his time, the Confucian Wang Yang-ming even alludes to this with regard to *Chan* 禪-Buddhist practices:

Once, there was a Chan master. People came to ask about the Dharma (of the Buddha). But he just lifted a fly-whisk. One day, his students hid his whisk. They were curious to know how he would demonstrate the Dharma. The Chan master was looking for his fly-whisk which he did not find. He then raised his empty hand into the air. My (remarks on the ineffable foundation of the) good-knowing (*liang zhi* 良知) (can be compared to) the demonstration of the Dharma by means of the whisk. What else could I raise into the air besides this (expression *liangzhi* 良知)? A short while later, another friend asked about the essentials of the task. Yangming looked down to his side and said: “Where is my fly-whisk?” Instantaneously, (that which he had alluded to) appeared vividly to all those sitting around him.⁵⁸

and origins of the philosophical use of the word “θεωρία” in Bartosch (2015b, 489–506, the chapter “Exkurs: Zu Kontexten der cusanischen Theorieauffassung” [“Excursus: On the Contexts of Cusanus’s Views Regarding Theory.”]). I must emphasize here that Confucius did not strive to live a theoretical life in a sense that would be comparable to Aristotelian views; his sayings are not part of a sort of *vita contemplativa*; nor did he have an analogy to the Platonic “θεῖα θεωρία” (“vision of God”) in mind, of course. Moreover, Nicolaus Cusanus’s (1401–1464) metaphorical philosophical interpretation of Greek “θεωρῶ” as “I run and see” is also not suitable to describe the Confucian ways (cf. Bartosch 2015b, 500 and the citation on page 291). See also Rausch (1982, 21–47). The most important original meaning of the word “theorist” (θεωρός) is that of an *envoy* to a *religious festival* who leaves his *polis* to “see the god” (namely, in the sense of a statue in a temple) at another sanctuary or *polis*. To put it differently and more bluntly, Confucian rituals are not about a form of self-reflection analogous to *visio Dei*, and Confucian teachings are not theoretical in the classical Western sense.

57 See Schmidt (2005, 134); Bartosch (2015b, 261).

58 Wang (1933b, 19): “一友問功夫不切・先生曰・學問功夫・我已曾一句道盡・如何今日轉說轉遠・都不著根・對曰・致良知蓋聞教矣・然亦須講明・先生曰・既知致良知・

This illustrates how a Confucian thinker avoids defining a basic term he uses in the sense of a fixed or “immovable” meaning:⁵⁹ the foundational level of the overall and general meaning in this word use remains ineffable; it can only be alluded to situation-wise. To put this another way, Confucius and his followers knew that the moral character could only be awakened individually and from the inside. Wang Yangming was aware of the fact that it would never be possible to drum the life of the *junzi* into a student’s *xin* from the outside.

In that sense, the wisdom which is the fountainhead of Confucian education is ineffable and belongs to the field of *implicit knowledge*. The core insight of *liangzhi* 良知, which only emerges out of individual practice as an accompanying intuition, is implicit and has to be realized by every student along their own observer path, so to speak. It is inherently without words. It can be understood as the situational harmony and overall progression which moves, generates, and guides *everything through everything*, integrating all existence in a constant flow or transformation of the whole of “Heaven, Earth and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wan wu* 天地萬物).

From a Confucian perspective, learning can be regarded as a gentle ascent towards that ineffable wisdom (another “fly-whisk” would be the word “*dao*”), which Confucius also alludes to as “*one to permeate everything*”. In that context, Confucius asks one of his pupils: “‘Ci, you think, I suppose, that I am one who learns many things and keeps them in memory?’ [The answer was], ‘Yes – but perhaps it is not so?’ ‘No’, was the answer; [‘I have one to permeate everything.】’”⁶⁰ In another passage, the Master says: “[M]y doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity.”⁶¹

But we can still ask: what does this “one” mean? In principle, “it” cannot be defined conclusively. “It” is “something” that permanently (in the sense of a verb) “principles” and is always correcting itself through all the changing occurrences of our personal lives, in accord with the constant self-development

又何可講明・良知本是明白・實落用功便是・不肯用功・只在語言上轉說轉糊塗・曰・正求講明致之功・先生曰・此亦須你自家求・我亦無別法可道・昔有禪師・人來問法・只把塵尾提起・一日・其徒將其塵尾藏過・試他如何設法・禪師尋塵尾不見・又只空手提起・我這箇良知就是設法的塵尾・舍了這箇・有何可提得・少間・又一友請問功夫切要・先生旁顧曰・我塵尾安在・一時在坐著皆躍然・”

59 This is because there is no such fixed sense, and meanings are created by the use of words. As such, this usage is always situational.

60 *Lunyu* 論語, “Wei Ling Gong 衛靈公”, 3: “「賜也,女以予為多學而識之者與?」對曰:「然,非與?」曰:「非也,予一以貫之。」”(Trans. Legge).

61 *Ibid.*, “Li Ren 里仁”, 15: “「參乎!吾道一以貫之。」”(Trans. Legge).

and self-modification of each living being's and each "thing's" (*wu* 物) exclusive situation. One might hint at it by saying that it is the fully realized, permanent self-reflection *in* and *as concrete action*. In this sense, the obligation of each human being (as the heart-mind of Heaven-and-Earth) lies in mirroring or self-reflecting the flow of situations in their ever-changing process of the unfolding of things – permanently and without aberration. With regard to the inherent aspect of ineffability, Confucius himself states that he would prefer to convey his teaching *without using any words*:

The Master said, "I would prefer not speaking." Zi Gong said, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" The Master said, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?"⁶²

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In a certain sense, this resonates with the central importance of this topic of ineffability for another major stream of earlier Chinese thought, emerging from the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the (*Book of*) *Zhuangzi* 莊子. In this tradition of Philosophical Daoism, *dao* 道 – as the root of all wording and language – is itself without words and (finite) concepts.⁶³ Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), however, argued that Confucius's approach to the ineffability of *dao* was *more evolved* than that of Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子. Instead of *speaking about* the ineffability of *dao*, Confucius methodologically *embodied* the ineffable fountainhead of all wisdom and transformation.⁶⁴ While centring his efforts on the human plane, he thereby constantly manifested that all-pervading oneness. It should be noted that Wang Yangming, among others, later combined Daoist and *Chan* Buddhist ways of communicating the incommunicability of *dao* with the understanding of the *embodiment* of *dao* in Confucian learning in various ways. On one occasion, Wang Yangming referred to this later Confucian synthesis or "absorption" of those related Daoist and Buddhist insights as the *da dao* 大道 ("Great Way").⁶⁵

Wang Yangming thereby even compares or relates the activities in the sense of his approach to Confucian learning and teaching to acts of

62 Ibid., "Yang Huo 陽貨", 19: "子曰：「予欲無言。」子貢曰：「子如不言，則小子何述焉？」子曰：「天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？」" (Trans. Legge).

63 See the first stanza of the *Daodejing* 道德經, 1; alternatively *ibid.*, 41: "道隱無名。夫唯道，善貸且成。" ["*Dao*—hidden and without name, this *dao* alone is good at bestowing and completing."]

64 See also Yuet (1999, 64); Wagner (1991, 463).

65 See Wang (2006, 1180): "聖人與天地民物同體，儒、佛、老、莊皆吾之用，是之謂大道。二氏自私其身，是之謂小道。"

divination (*bushi* 卜筮). In that context, the aforementioned five foundational modalities of holistic learning from the *Zhongyong* (see part 3) – namely (1) *boxue* (“extensive study”), (2) *shenwen* (“accurate inquiry”), (3) *shensi* (“careful reflection”), (4) *mingbian* (“clear discrimination”), and (5) *duxing* (“earnest practice”) – should be understood as fundamental forms of “divination” in a much deeper, symbolic, and *extended* sense. This implies that these modalities should be viewed as direct ways of reflecting the ineffable source of the ever-present transformation of the generative whole of “Heaven-and-Earth and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wan wu* 天地萬物). In this regard, Wang Yangming states:

[Most people] do not know that questions and answers between teachers and friends of the present day, as well as extensive studies, accurate inquiry, careful reflection, clear discrimination and earnest practice, are all [acts of] divination [in the sense of “reading”/reflecting *dao* in the context of a specific situation].⁶⁶

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Drawing upon these deeper levels of learning and teaching, Confucius himself unfolded his personal path of wisdom in such a way that, in every situation and change of his life, he was able to earnestly state: “I have no course for which I am predetermined, and no course against which I am predetermined.”⁶⁷ At this stage of learning, human consciousness is restored to its utmost clarity and spontaneity, while simultaneously being confronted with the inherent (philosophical) problem of (in)effability.

Final Remarks and Outlook

Concerning the further internationalization and modern transformation of Confucian-based practices of learning and self-cultivation, it is necessary to consider how to connect classical Confucian learning – and the explicit and implicit modalities of learning and understanding presented in this investigation – with compatible conceptions of modern Western and other non-Western systems of pedagogy.⁶⁸ In my view, certain aspects of pre-modern Confucian learning are uniquely suited to help address the problems of the modern world. The element of ineffability, and the manner in which pre-modern Confucian teachers have dealt with it, remains inspiring. Confucian scholars and

66 Wang (1933b, 12): “不知今之師友問答・博學・審問・慎思・明辨・篤行之類・皆是卜筮。”

67 Lunyu 論語, “Wei Zi 微子”, 8: “「我則異於是,無可無不可。」”(Trans. Legge).

68 For a proposal in this regard, see Bartosch (2015b, 427, 522–8).

practitioners have shown that their way of learning stays open to receiving and absorbing whatever might provide some means to solve current affairs or any problems of the day.⁶⁹

It seems obvious that our current Information Age will have to be “recharged” by means of the interpersonal human(e) bonds which naturally “grow out” of *ren* 仁; yet, we face the problem that our modern method of education is mostly fixated on the cultivation of explicit knowledge. We should start to understand that our technological and informational rationality – and its artificial extensions – form a rather superficial exterior compared to the possibilities of deeper forms of holistic, “inter-human(e)” *Bildung*. It is more important than ever that humanity learns not to be carried away by technological reality, by overstimulated senses, or by the results of technologically enhanced explicit knowledge. Without neglecting the achievements of modernity, humanity now has the obligation to return to the original – innate – wisdom of the “heart-mind” (*xin* 心), namely, the symbolic and situational root of an intuitive and situational consciousness which always “finds its way” by striving for a continuous and humane self-integration in the constant flow of Heaven-and-Earth and the ten thousand things.

Reviving Confucianism in a new form and adapting it to the needs of the 21st century, or combining it with modern educational or philosophical concepts, might help humanity to swim against the stream of entropy amplified by the technological and scientific revolutions of the last 200 years. Achieving equilibrium and maintaining an economic, ecological, and social balance should be the utmost concern of humanity as a whole. In this regard, pre-modern Confucian learning offers a wealth of valuable insights that have to be brought into dialogue with the pedagogical and related philosophical traditions of other ancient civilizations in a future-directed perspective.

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69 *Lunyu* 論語, “Li Ren 里仁”, 10: “「君子之於天下也,無適也,無莫也,義之與比。」” [“The Master said, ‘The superior man, in the world, does not set his mind either for anything, or against anything; what is right he will follow.’” (Trans. Legge).]

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Marko OGRIZEK

Following the Way of the Ancient Kings: The Concept of “Learning” in the Teachings of Ogyū Sorai

Abstract

Ogyū Sorai conceptualizes “learning” as the study of the way of the ancient kings. The way thus represents the rites, music, penal laws and administrative systems which the ancient kings established. Making faith in the sages the foundation of learning, Sorai designates the ancient kings as intermediaries between the ordering activity of heaven and human society. This article tries to examine some of the implications of such a conceptualization, both for the proposed system of social organization as well as for Sorai’s own project of elucidating the way.

Keywords: Ogyū Sorai, Tokugawa Confucianism, learning, way of the ancient kings, sages

Introduction

Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) is considered one of the most influential Japanese thinkers of the Edo period (1603–1868) and a sharp critic of Zhu Xi's School of Structural Principle. His central works are the two philosophical dictionaries – the *Bendō* 弁道¹ and the *Benmei* 弁名² – in which he systematically discusses a wide variety of classical Confucian concepts: chief among which is the way of the ancient kings (*sennō no michi*, 先王之道). This article tries to examine Sorai's project based on his concept of “learning” (*xue/gaku* 学) – firstly from the perspective of the proposed subject, methodology and goals; and secondly by taking a closer look at some of its ideological and political implications.

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Sorai promotes the study of the way of the ancient kings, which is a creation of the sages – it is not a natural way. It is the way of governing the people and bringing peace and stability to the kingdom under heaven. As such it has its concrete form – the rites, music, penal laws and the administrative systems (*li le xing zheng/reigakukeisei* 礼楽刑政), which the ancient kings founded. By following the way, the people are brought to their proper virtues (*de/toku* 徳). By gaining their proper virtues the people find their place within society. The societal whole is in turn ordered and made peaceful.

The way is the way of the early kings – but while the kings are many, the way is always one. Sorai struggles to provide a proper explanation as to how the one way functions through a myriad of different cultural expressions; and also how the way is adapted through time. There seems to be no better approach for him to try to square a variety of traditions with the one true ordering activity of the way than to assert the extraordinary intelligence of the sage kings and its wide-ranging influence. The ancient sages are used as a societal/historical myth – to bridge the gap between the activities of heaven and human society, while at the same time providing an explanation for the value of particular cultural expressions over others.

Sorai's concept of the way of the ancient kings places the way firmly within a certain historical and cultural context – but the way also possesses universal aspects: namely, its ordering activity. By connecting the origin of the way with the concept of the patterns of heaven – which the sages alone could understand and convey – Sorai sets reverence (*jing/kei* 敬) for heaven (*tian/ten* 天) and faith (*shin* 信) in the ancient sages (*sheng/sei* 聖) as the foundations of learning.

1 *Distinguishing the Way.*

2 *Distinguishing Names.*

This article thus tries to examine some of the reasoning for, as well as the implications of, such a conceptualization of “learning”, for both the system of social organization that is proposed as well as Sorai’s own project of elucidating the way.

The Way of the Ancient Kings

Sorai’s interpretation of classical Confucian concepts is characterized by a sharp move away from discussions of personal self-cultivation and in the direction of the social and political. Sorai’s work itself can in a way be considered political in ambition, though it is first and foremost educational in nature.

To demonstrate the deeper ideological and political aspects of Sorai’s concept of “learning”, it is necessary to first explore its proposed subject, methods and goals. Sorai sets these out in a simple and precise manner, as follows:

“Learning” refers to studying the way of the ancient kings. The ancient kings’ way is contained within the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Music*. The method of learning should consist of studying what is in the *Books of Poetry, History, Rites, and Music*, and that is all. These subjects are the “four teachings” or “four arts”.³ The *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History* are repositories of ritual principle, the *Book of Rites* and the *Book of Music* set out the models for virtue.⁴ Virtue refers to that by which the self is established; ritual principle refers to what is followed in governing. Studying the *Book of Poems*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Music* is sufficient for educating scholar-knights.⁵

Possessing extraordinary virtue and intelligence, through which they were able to follow heaven’s decree (*tian ming/tenmei* 天命), the ancient sages established the way, which the princes study and the people follow (Ogyū 1974, 219). The act of founding the way is in fact what defines sages – no one

3 Sorai here quotes from: *Liji*, Wangzhi.

4 Sorai here quotes from: *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, Xi gong ershiqi nian.

5 學者。謂學先王之道也。先王之道。在詩書禮樂。故學之方。亦學詩書禮樂而已矣。是謂之四教。又謂之四術。詩書者義之府也。禮樂者德之則也。德者所以立己也。義者所以從政也。故詩書禮樂。足以造士。(Ogyū 1974, 249; Ogyū 2006, 312). In rendering various parts of the *Bendō* and the *Benmei* into English, I lean heavily on the English translations by John Allen Tucker in Ogyū (2006). To not burden the text with marking how the translations differ, I provide page references to Tucker’s original translation.

can reproduce their work and no amount of learning can make the people of today into sages (ibid., 216). Rather, the goals of education encompass developing the talents and virtues needed to follow the way that the sages have already set out.

Studying the way of the ancient kings consists of following what the ancient kings established, but according to Sorai this itself has now become one of the central problems, because the sages' way, as a living transformational force, has been completely depleted since even the time of Confucius. Confucius – who according to Sorai was himself born in the wrong age to be a proper founder – nevertheless helped convey the proper teachings through editing the six classics (Ogyū 1974, 217). The six classics then came to represent the sole repositories of the way of the ancient kings. Unfortunately, in time even the proper understanding of ancient words and phrases became lost, and wrong interpretations of the texts thus came to prevail (ibid., 209–210).

Being a creation of the sages is a key aspect of the way: “The way of the ancient kings consists in what the ancient kings formulated. It is not the natural way of heaven and earth.”⁶

With the way being a creation, the ultimate standard (*ji/kyoku* 極) – the fundamental standard of what is proper and good – is also wholly defined by the ancient kings (ibid., 248). Sorai explicitly discards the cosmo-ontological discussions of his predecessors, and sets the ancient sages as the sole originators of not only a common system of values and meaning represented in the way, but also as the originators of the only possibility of a common standard, and therefore of any common system of value and meaning as such. Sorai does not believe people can live outside such a system. Through his conceptualization of the heart-mind, he identifies the people's need for a life within a community – a fundamental natural tendency of the people. While they can differ from one another greatly and are basically prone to disordered lives, the people are fundamentally communal:

While natural tendencies of people do differ from person to person, regardless of an individual's knowledge or ignorance, worthiness or unworthiness, all are the same in having heart-minds that mutually love, nourish, assist, and perfect one another. People are alike in their capacity to work together and undertake tasks cooperatively. Thus for government, we depend on the ruler; for nourishment, we depend on the people. Farmers, artisans, and merchants all make a living for themselves by

6 先王之道。先王所造也。非天地自然之道也。(Ogyū 1974, 201; Ogyū 2006, 142).

relying upon each other. One cannot forsake society and live alone in a deserted land: these are simply people's natural tendencies.⁷

People's natural tendencies are turned towards communal life and cooperation – but they are at the same time disordered and without proper standards and therefore need to be directed along the way of the ancient kings – ordered, so that society can be ordered in turn. The way of the ancient kings brings the people to their proper virtues and in this manner orders and defines society as a whole. The way encompasses the proper practices and institutions established by the early kings; while virtues represent what people gain by following the way according to their natural tendencies (*xing/sei* 性), talents and abilities (Ogyū 1974, 212).

The way of the ancient kings possesses an explicit purpose. Sorai writes: “The way of the ancient kings is the way that provides for the peace of the kingdom under heaven.”⁸

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Because the way has been lost as a concrete system of common practices, which once held the living transformational and ordering powers of the sages' own virtues, and because even the ancient words and phrases are now misunderstood and wilfully reinterpreted, the project of distinguishing names must be undertaken – one with a special emphasis on the proper philological study of ancient words and phrases (*kobunjigaku* 古文辞学) (ibid., 251). This becomes Sorai's central project.

Everyone can follow the way, but understanding it is extremely rare (ibid., 215) – people may thus only follow it according to their capabilities. Knowledge of the way comes from the proper practice of the rites, which happens through a process of internalization. This is also what “investigating things” (*gewu/kakubutsu* 格物) means to Sorai (ibid., 250). By understanding the names of “the concrete”, the people can practice the way and develop virtues – which then further strengthen the way. Sorai claims the way to be a “universal way” (ibid., 212) – and thus there are not different ways for rulers and the ruled – but it is also quite clear that the concept of education for Sorai is a multi-tiered process: one which is not the same for those who rule and those who are ruled.

Possessing concrete form, the way is further placed within a definite historical and cultural context:

7 人性雖殊乎。然無知愚賢不肖。皆有相愛相養相輔相成之心。運用當為之才者一矣。故資治於君。資養於民。農工商賈。皆相資為生。不能去其群獨立於無人之鄉者。唯人之性為然。(Ogyū 1974, 213; Ogyū 2006, 187).

8 先王之道。安天下之道也。(Ogyū 1974, 200; Ogyū 2006, 139).

The way is a comprehensive name. It refers to everything that the ancient kings established, especially the rites, music, penal laws and administrative institutions. The way embraces and designates them all. There is not something called the “the way” apart from their rites, music, penal laws, and administrative systems of government.⁹

The way of the ancient kings is a comprehensive term which combines different aspects of a well-ordered society: the legal, political and cultural. The penal laws and the administrative system are both part of the way, but in the *Bendō* and the *Benmei* Sorai does not put much emphasis on them. More than once he emphasizes that even though they represent the legal and the political aspects of the way, they are not enough to bring about a well-ordered society of peace and stability – and neither is learning through language alone (Ogyū 1974, 219). The way can only be actualized through rites and music, which represent its concrete cultural substance.

Unfortunately, Sorai never properly problematizes his own concepts, and in the *Bendō* and *Benmei* remains rather vague about the related rites and music as such. He states that the way is one of bringing peace and stability to the kingdom under heaven – but he never questions what such a peace would actually entail. A generous reading of his views therefore offers a system in which people each find their place within the common way according to their abilities and natural tendencies. A less generous reading offers a well-argued excuse for a system of strict social hierarchy in a deeply unequal society, not unlike the Tokugawa shogunate of his time.¹⁰

Culture as the Concrete Form of the Way

The way of the ancient kings was created by the sages and encompasses the rites, music, penal laws and administrative systems that they founded. The sages established these by properly naming “the concrete”, and thus enabling the people to follow and finally comprehend the correct practices:

Since humanity was born into the world,¹¹ where there has been the concrete, there have been names.¹² Of names, from the start it was the case that ordinary people coined some of them. Yet these were

9 道者統名也。拳礼楽刑政凡先王所建者。合而命之也。非離礼楽刑政別有所謂道者也。(Ogyū 1974, 201; Ogyū 2006, 140).

10 Anachronistic as such criticisms might seem.

11 Sorai quotes from: *Mengzi*, Liang Huiwang xia.

12 Sorai quotes from: *Shijing*, Sheng Min.

only names given to the concrete having form. When it came to the concrete having no form, because ordinary people could not discern it, the sages established names for it. Thereafter even ordinary people could perceive and comprehend it.¹³

Having set the ultimate standard (*ji/kyoku*), the sages created the way for people to be brought together from a separate standardless existence and guided to surpass their natural tendencies through being ordered according to the way. The names are therefore to be understood for what the sages put into them – for Sorai they must not be wilfully interpreted (Ogyū 1974, 209–10) or the way cannot be recovered.

To further emphasize that the ancient kings' way follows no natural law, but establishes the only proper laws for itself, Sorai maintains that the sages did not pattern their way on any structural principles, and thus the way cannot be known through any study of these.

Structural principles are what all affairs and things naturally have. In using our minds to figure matters, in some [courses of action] we see how to do what we must and should do, and how to do what we necessarily should not do. Such calculations involve structural principles. Whoever wants to do good will indeed see the structural principles for what they should do and will do it. Whoever wants to do evil also will see the structural principles for what they should do and will do it. In either case, our heart-minds see what should be done and we do it. Thus structural principles offer no fixed standards.¹⁴

To Sorai, the structural principles – in offering a way for both the good and the bad, whichever a person sets their intention to – can offer no fixed standards for the proper practice of the people, and thus no true foundations for the way. Sorai even claims that though the sages understood the structural principles perfectly, they still did not base their way on them (*ibid.*, 245). The structural principles are therefore not something which needs to be studied, nor something which can even be understood in a manner that would benefit either those learning or the way itself.

In the same sense Sorai denies that rightness (*yi/gi* 義) is among the virtues

13 自生民以来、有物有名。名故有常人名焉者。是名於物之有形焉者已。至於物之亡形焉者。則常人之所不能睹者。而聖人立焉名焉。然常人後雖常人可見而識之也。(Ogyū 1974, 209; Ogyū 2006, 171).

14 理者。事物皆自然有之。以我信心推度之。而有見其心當若是心不可若是。是謂之理。凡人欲為善。亦見其理之可為而為之。欲為惡。亦見其理之可為而為之。皆我心見其可為而為也。故理者無定準者也。(Ogyū 1974, 244; Ogyū 2006, 295).

(ibid., 221) the people can attain. For him rightness, as part of the way of the ancient kings, is strictly the rightness of the rituals, as prescribed by the sages – or rather, a set of “ritual principles”. Value and meaning of any kind cannot be found in what things possess naturally, nor do virtues themselves originate from people’s natural tendencies or their heart-minds (*xin/shin* 心). The only common systems of value and meaning, which can actually thrive in peace and stability, derive from the way of the ancient kings, and only in relation to such systems can we further speak of virtues.

People usually understand that the rites are those founded by the ancient kings, but do not realize that the principles of rightness are the ritual principles of these rites. Because of this, none of their interpretations of rightness make sense. Now, rightness is best understood as part of the way. The myriad differences and the myriad distinctions within the rites each have their rightful place. Therefore, it is said, “Rightness is what is right”.^{15,16}

Sorai considers ancient debates about people’s natural tendencies (*xing/sei*) – whether they are inherently good or not – to be unproductive (Ogyū 1974, 204). Rightness, which gives the basis for standardized value and meaning, is not something which is internal to people – it belongs to the rites of the way. Therefore what is proper and right is measured against the way of the ancient kings. When people follow the way, they gain their respective virtues – virtues are thus what is gained by the proper directing of people’s natural tendencies along the way, and what determines each person’s contributions to it. People differ in their natural tendencies, and so they also differ in the virtues they are able to complete (ibid.).

Sorai in some ways recognizes that any cultural expression is built on the foundations of history, and also that the way of the ancient kings cannot be reduced to either the wholly universal or the wholly particular. On the one hand the way is seen as something concrete and particular, and on the other as possessing universal ordering powers.

Bitō Masahide remarks on this in a concise fashion:

In the section on the Way in Benmei, we are told the Way is universal, but that certain of its aspects change from age to age, and why this is something only the sages know. [Sorai] is suggesting here that when the

15 Sorai quotes from: *Liji*, Zhongyong.

16 人多知礼為先王之礼。而不知義亦為先王之義。故其解皆不通矣。蓋義者道之分也。千差万別。各有所宜。故曰義者宜也。 (Ogyū 1974, 220; Ogyū 2006, 210–1).

Way is altered to meet the conditions of each age, only its phenomenological aspect changes, not its essential substance. In his description, the Way actually exists as real social institutions – as ritual, music, punishments, and governing – so it is natural for the Way to change as the world moves from one age, and from the institutions a sage created to meet its needs, to another. The sages, however, are plural, while the Way, as Sorai describes it, is presumably singular. Nowhere is there even the slightest hint that there are a variety of Ways. Rather, he notes repeatedly, as he does in the section on learning in the *Benmei*, that the Way is always the same, past and present. (Bitō 1978, 154–5)

The way draws its essential substance from its ordering power and purpose, since it is the way which provides for peace and stability for the kingdom under heaven. Such a purpose then also becomes the central measure of the proper way – the proper way is such that it brings peace and stability. With regard to how the different cultural expressions of the way would exist and have this universal effect, and how even then there can be no such way except that of the ancient kings, Sorai remains vague.¹⁷ In the same manner, he does not provide any clear means of adapting the way to the present time. As the system was set out by the sages – who were people of the most extraordinary intelligence – it cannot be adapted in any meaningful way without the hand of another sage, whose coming remains a mystery.

This then leaves Sorai with the task of trying to explain why the ancient Chinese kings' way is the one way to bring peace to all under heaven – a task which many Edo period scholars tried their hand at through numerous different approaches.¹⁸ Sorai's own approach is not to try and overwrite the Chinese cultural specifics of the way, like some other scholars of the period, but rather to claim that while the way does indeed come from the ancient kings of China, their influence was far reaching and left its mark on ancient Japan as well. Some of the traces of the way, which may have already been lost in contemporary China, might therefore have been better preserved in Japan.¹⁹

This of course does not solve the stated problem in any meaningful fashion, and only seems to produce further ideological burdens. In the end Sorai

17 Sorai goes only as far as to say neither the east nor the west ever produced sages—only the Middle Kingdom. (Ogyū 1974, 256).

18 For a study of this, see Wildman Nakai (1980).

19 Ibid. It is also notable that the reason given is that Japan does not possess such original thinkers as China, and thus the way would have been left in its primitive (and proper) state in the former.

turns to a different solution – one that is very well described by Kate Wildman Nakai:

Might not one conclude that the Tokugawa thinkers considered here, faced with a set of contradictions that offered no ready prospect of dialectical resolution, chose both consciously and unconsciously to deal with them as such, to regard the world as a series of fractured truths, each absolute only within its own sphere? To live it was necessary to make a commitment, take a stance; as Sorai says, to make up one's mind on the basis of faith. But it was also necessary simultaneously to recognize, on another level, that there are no true absolutes, only a contradictory multiplicity of apparent ones. (Wildman Nakai 1980, 198–9)

Sorai sets faith in the sages as the foundation of learning, and while this offers a certain powerful insight into the nature of any common system of value and meaning – that in some ways it is always based on an implicit faith in the value of participation – it also brings with it certain ideological and political considerations, which should be further explored.

Faith in the Sages and the Reverence of Heaven

“Learning” means studying the ancient kings’ way, and adhering to their standards. There is no natural law on which the way is based – yet to affirm that the way of the sages and it alone possesses not only its unique common-value-and-meaning giving space, but also its proper ordering powers, Sorai does assert that the authority of the sages comes from the special relationship they had with heaven.

Culture (*bun*) is the reason that the way acquired a form and name. Now, what is in the heavens, the sages called patterns (*bun*). What is in the earth was called structural principle. The great origin of the way emerged from heaven. Indeed, the ancient sage kings of antiquity founded the way by modelling it on heaven. For this reason, they provided the way with form as brilliant rites and music. Thus these are referred to as culture.²⁰

Sorai conceptualizes heaven as the origin of all ordering activity, and connects it closely with the concept of the Lord on High (*di/tei* 帝) – the concept of both the absolute ancestral presence and the absolute ruler. Sorai describes the relationship between the sages and heaven both in its epistemological

20 文者。所以狀道而命之也。蓋在天曰文。在地曰理。道之大原出於天。古先聖王法以立道。故其為狀也禮樂粲然。是之謂文。(Ogyū 1974, 151; Ogyū 2006, 322).

and religious dimensions – the sages possessed both special insight into heaven’s decree as well as perfect reverence of heaven itself. In this sense, their work was unique: they named the formless, overcame the standardless and brought to the people the cultural essence of the way, through which they may complete their proper virtues. And in this light, Sorai’s insistence that the work of the sages cannot be reproduced can also perhaps be understood better.

Furthermore, Sorai’s concept of heaven possesses yet another key characteristic – being fundamentally unfathomable.

Heaven cannot be fathomed. For this reason the ancient classics state, “Heaven’s decree is not constant” and “The decree is not constant”. The ancient sages perfectly worshiped, revered, and stood in awe of it without cease. In doing so, they expressed the utmost reverence in relation to it. They did this precisely because they were not able to fathom heaven.²¹

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Heaven being unfathomable, even the sages themselves could not understand it in an exhaustive way – they could only appreciate and revere it. Possessing perfect virtue, they were able to model themselves on heaven’s activity – to model their ordering activity on the ordering activity of heaven. Heaven’s activity is itself not based on law, but is instead the activity of an absolute ruler. Rather than being understood, heaven is to be revered: the first ritual principle of the way itself becomes the reverence of the unknowable, whose activity is only ever properly appreciated in following the way. As the sages have brought forth value and meaning through revering the unfathomable, such value and meaning can, with the sages gone, now only be reproduced through proper reverence. The sages represent a looming historical/societal myth, but one that in Sorai’s formulation actually loses most of its living dimensions, although very much present in classical Confucianism.

Here Sorai, who supposedly values rites and music above legal and administrative systems, in fact comes across as possibly manipulative in a way that classical Confucianism was not. Bitō Masahide offers a pointed critique on this point:

There is no question that the idea of instructing the people by means of “ritual” or “ritual and music” occurs in classical Confucianism. Instruction by ritual though usually refers to ritual’s encouraging a moral awareness in men. It does not mean that ritual is to be used to induce men,

21 蓋天者也。不可得而測焉者也。故曰天命靡常。惟命不于常。古之聖人。欽崇敬畏之弗遑。若是其至焉者。以其不可而測故也。(Ogyū 1974, 235; Ogyū 2006, 264).

through manipulation of their collective mentality, to act in a specific manner. (Bitō 1978, 158)

The sages stand as the brilliant forefathers, who could name the formless and make comprehensible what the people could otherwise not comprehend, but the sages-as-intermediaries, being gone from the world, now also turn into a barrier between contemporary people and heaven's activity itself. The sages' way is the proper way for rulers to model themselves after, and the only way for the people to be brought to their proper virtues. The ultimate standards belong to the special relationship sages had with heaven – one, which can now no longer be replicated in its epistemological dimensions, but only in its religious ones.

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This of course also carries with it certain political implications. The sages are not only people of a special higher intelligence, they are as a rule also the leaders of antiquity – and as such are the models for the rulers of today. Their way is the way, which defines the ultimate standard. When the ruler and the ruled both work in service of the way, there can be no real questioning of a ruler's authority without also questioning the way and the sages. Because the origin of a ruler's authority is unfathomable and unassailable – the ruler being the one who is carrying out the rites of the way – a person would have to be a sage to actually question the ruler. The practical implications of this are that the ruler rules (with reverence) and the people follow (with reverence). Learning is no longer a noble path of rising above one's station in life – it is a way to properly conform.

It is thus no coincidence that Sorai's own project in some ways falls victim to his concepts. The strict adherence to the scriptural integrity of the ancient classics as the sole repositories of the way of the ancient kings brings with it an unpleasant undercurrent in Sorai's work, which John Allen Tucker describes as authoritarian:

Sorai's reconceptualization [...] was based upon his presumed insights into the nature of meaning, and was meant to achieve nothing less than the recovery of the way and, thereby, realization of the grounds for possibility of a peaceful and stable, well-ordered realm in which all could achieve their innate capacities. While the latter was an undeniably humanitarian ambition, Sorai's system of meaning announced in the *Bendō* and *Benmei* was also intensely authoritarian, adamantly turning against the semantically liberal and innovative tendencies that had earlier developed in association with the genre [of philosophical lexicography]. (Ogyū 2006, 15)

Conclusion

Sorai sets faith in the sages as the foundation of learning. While this seems to solve some of his ideological problems, it at the same time produces implications which reverberate throughout his whole system, coming in the end to dominate even his own project of semantic research. While Sorai's project is most definitely a work of seminal importance – and one which offers a powerful insight into the ways societies are constructed on ideological foundations – it cannot escape the impression that in important ways it ultimately reveals just as much by what it manages to say as by what it fails to say.

And while at first glance Sorai's teachings bring forth a humanitarian project of reclaiming the way of the ancient kings and bringing peace and stability to the realm under heaven, a study of some of his concepts – with knowledge and learning chief among them – can also paint a different picture: of a somewhat dishonest epistemological doctrine, which yet again reinforces the parts of the Confucian legacy which most aim to uphold the deep inequalities of its patriarchal hierarchies.

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Nam NGUYEN

A Vietnamese Reading of the Master's Classic: Phạm Nguyễn Du's *Humble Comments on the Analects* as an Example of Transformative Learning¹

Abstract

Phạm Nguyễn Du's influential text *Humble Comments on the Analects* (*Luận Ngữ Ngụ Án* 論語愚按) is an outstanding example of a Vietnamese adaptation and reworking of an East Asian intellectual tradition. In organizing his work, Phạm departed from convention by rearranging the extant chapters of the *Analects* into four "books": "Sage" (*Thánh* 聖), "Learning" (*Học* 學), "Official" (*Sĩ* 仕), and "Politics" (*Chính* 政). Moreover, Phạm placed

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particular emphasis on the “Learning” book, and thus underscored his contention that the classic text was especially relevant and meaningful to 18th-century Vietnam. This paper attempts to read Phạm’s work in the contexts of both Confucian tradition and contemporary education. First, it examines Phạm’s composition of the *Humble Comments* based on Jack Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. Phạm’s writing process in this work presents a fascinating case of transformative learning, in which the author questions received assumptions about the world and himself, puts forward new propositions, and elaborates these via an original reading of a classic. Through the analysis of Phạm Nguyễn Du’s life and his preface to the *Humble Comments*, one can also gain a better view of the Vietnamese reception of Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism, and more particularly, of Zhu’s dictum of “learning for the sake of one’s self” (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學). Lastly, this dictum will be reappraised to show its validity in contemporary educational contexts.

Keywords: Sage, learning for the sake of one’s self, transformative learning, civil service examination, *kunzhi* (acquiring true knowledge from predicaments)

Introduction

Although much ink has been spilled on the subject of Confucianism in early modern Vietnam, many aspects of this important topic remain poorly understood. How did Vietnamese literati receive and adapt Neo-Confucianism? How were the Confucian classics read to meet the particular needs of Vietnamese intellectuals living in a society structured by civil service examinations? What do the lives and careers of individual Vietnamese Confucians reveal about the broader picture of Confucian practices in Vietnam?

In this paper, I consider these questions by examining the career of Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 (1739–1786) and his *Humble Comments on the Analects* (*Luận Ngữ Ngu Án* 論語愚按, hereafter *Humble Comments*), a commentary on Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian thought. I contend that Phạm’s life and his composition of the *Humble Comments* can be analysed as a form of transformative learning. As first defined by Jack Mezirow (1923–2014) in the middle of the 1970s and then developed by other scholars, the theory of transformative learning has become popular in North America, and is “gaining the interest of scholars in Europe, Asia, and Africa” (Jarvis 2012, 201). The application of transformative learning theory to the case of Phạm’s life and his *Humble Comments* allows a better understanding of his intellectual evolution and distinctive understanding of the Confucian dictum of “learning for the sake of one’s self”. This paper begins with an overview of transformative learning theory, followed by a brief biography of Phạm Nguyễn Du. As we examine the *Humble Comments*, traces of Zhu Xi’s *Collected Comments on the Analects*

(*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注, hereafter *Collected Comments*) become observable, providing us with an example of the Vietnamese reception of Neo-Confucianism. This paper will make the case for the *Humble Comments* as an instance of transformative learning, as reflected in Phạm's struggles to escape his intellectual and social predicaments and gain true knowledge. Finally, the Confucian dictum of "learning for the sake of one's self", as advocated in the *Humble Comments*, will be reappraised to indicate its validity in the context of contemporary education.

"Transformative Learning" – An Overview

The theory of "perspective transformation" was first put forward in 1975 by Jack Mezirow, an American sociologist and professor of adult and continuing education (Jarvis 2012, xiii). Mezirow was inspired in part by the experiences of his wife, Edee, who returned to school as an adult (Lawrence 2015, 1). Mezirow's framework would later be developed into what is now known as transformative learning, a theory of why and how human beings persistently struggle to better comprehend their world and cultivate a more critical outlook.

"Frame of reference" is a foundational concept in the theory of transformative learning. This term has been defined as "the meaning structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions". Each frame of reference has two dimensions, known as "habits of mind" and "points of view". Understood as habitual means of thinking, feeling, and acting effected by cultural, political, social, educational, and economic assumptions about the world of the subject, habits of mind can turn into a person's viewpoints, or in other words, they "get expressed in a specific point of view" (Jarvis 2012, 196). Transformative learning has been defined by Mezirow and others as a process "leading to a deep shift in perspective during which habits of mind become more open, more permeable, more discriminating, and better justified" (Cranton 2006 in Kroth 2014, 3). The deep shift in question is also known as a perspective transformation, or paradigmatic shift, and this often proceeds

...[T]hrough a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes or as a result of an acute personal or social crisis, for example, a natural disaster, the death of a significant other, divorce, a debilitating accident, war, job loss, or retirement. (Taylor 2008, 6)

Going beyond the initial experiences that Mezirow observed through the specific case of women's re-entry programs in community college, the perspective transformation is clearly "not limited to women and appears even in traditional cultures characterized by *Gemeinschaft* social relationships" (Mezirow 1978, 55). Scholars in the field have also pointed out that transformative learning can take place in any situation in which adults are learning, including "formal settings, informal settings, and in independent, auto-didactic settings" (Kroth 2014, xv). Moreover, transformative learning is not exclusively a form of individual learning, as it can also include group learning processes and certain forms of social change (Jarvis 2012, 201).

Mezirow's well-known "ten phases of transformative learning" are summarized in the chart below.

Table 1: Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning
(Adapted from Kitchenham 2008, 105).

Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

As these ten phases are well suited to Phạm Nguyễn Du's life and his composition of the *Humble Comments*, they are employed as an *interpretive* tool to present the development of Phạm's thoughts. In its turn, Phạm's case can serve as an exemplary narrative to be added to the repertoire of stories of transformative learning.

Using the ten phases listed in this chart, a careful analysis of Phạm's life and his preface to the *Humble Comments* illuminates the process of reception and adaptation of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in 18th-century Vietnam in general, and Phạm's transformative learning process in particular.

Phạm Nguyễn Du: A Widower Confucian in 18th-Century Civil-war Torn Đại Việt

Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 lived in a time of chaos and civil strife. He was born and grew up in the divided kingdom of Đại Việt, which had split into rival northern and southern realms during the 17th century. Over the course of his life, Đại Việt would be torn by rebellions and civil war, culminating eventually in the conflagration known as the Tây Sơn wars (1771–1802). As an intellectual living amid war and political and social upheaval, Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 was a Confucian who longed for an imagined earlier golden age of peace and order.

Originally from Nghệ An (a province in today's central Vietnam, known for its intellectual traditions as well as the rebellious spirit of its residents), Phạm Nguyễn Du was first known as Phạm Huy Khiêm 范摛謙; he later used the names Hiếu Đức 好德 and Dưỡng Hiên 養軒, while often writing under the literary name of Thạch Động 石洞. Renowned for his cleverness as a youth, Phạm was recruited to serve in the Imperial Diary Office of the Lê-Trịnh 黎鄭 Court, which ruled the northern realm of Đàng Ngoài (literally “outer region”). Phạm passed the Metropolitan Examination in the 40th year of the reign of Cảnh Hưng 景興 (1779), when he was 40 years old, and was promoted to the Hanlin Academy and Historiography Institute.² A loyalist to the Restored Lê dynasty, Phạm considered all anti-Lê-dynasty powers (including the leaders of the Tây Sơn uprising) to be usurpers, and maintained this conviction despite considerable evidence that the Lê dynasty was corrupt and in decline. According to the *Records on Nghệ An* (Nghệ An ký 乂安記) and *Comprehensive Study of the Metropolitan Graduates through the Dynasties* (Lịch triều đăng khoa bị khảo 歷朝登科備考), Phạm was serving as the official in charge of Nghệ An province in 1786 when he learned that the Tây Sơn had seized Phú Xuân, the capital of Đàng Ngoài's southern rival. Faced with this alarming news, he left for Thanh Chương-Nam Đàn, intending to recruit soldiers to fight against the Tây Sơn. But he fell ill and died before he could put his defence plans into action (this brief biography of Phạm Nguyễn Du is based on “Phạm Nguyễn Du and His *Records of a Broken Heart*” in Phạm 2001, 5–6).

Beyond socio-political events, Phạm's worldview was deeply affected by personal tragedy. In 1772, while serving in the Ministry of Personnel,

2 In his preface to the *Humble Comments on the Analects*, Phạm also indicated that he was reinstated into the Hanlin Academy as commissioner in 1778.

Phạm received the sad news that his wife of 13 years, Nguyễn Thị Đoan Hương 阮氏端香, had passed away at the age of 29. Just sixteen years old at the time of her wedding, Đoan Hương joined Phạm in a marriage that was happy but often interrupted by his civil service duties. The death of Phạm's wife was a devastating loss, and grief-stricken, he mourned her with 14 eulogies, 49 parallel couplets, and 34 sorrowful poems. These writings were later arranged chronologically in a collection titled *Records of a Broken Heart* (Đoạn trường lục 斷腸錄) (ibid., 2001, 38–39). This collection reveals much about Phạm's emotional inner life; yet it also reflects his thoughts about learning and the purposes of knowledge. On the heels of this personal tragedy, Phạm also underwent an intellectual crisis that would change him forever. Rereading the *Analects* and writing a commentary on it apparently helped Phạm to reorganize his life around the goal of Confucian enlightenment, and to overcome the above-mentioned difficulties standing in his way.

The Humble Comments on the Analects and Zhu Xi's Collected Comments

Phạm Nguyễn Du wrote the *Humble Comments on the Analects*³ between 1778 and 1780, while serving as a court official. The connection between his work and Zhu Xi's *Collected Comments* (*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集註) is shown in the title of Phạm's text. Phạm was obviously familiar with Zhu's *Collected Comments*, as he mentioned it in his description of the composition of his *Humble Comments*. "At first I read the main text until becoming intimately familiar with it", he wrote, "then [I] elaborately examined the *Collected Commentaries*, and later carefully went through other Confucians' explanations" (Phạm Nguyễn Du's "Preface" to the *Humble Comments*). Phạm's attitude toward Zhu Xi's work is consistent with the Confucian notion of "Study of Principle" (*Lixue* 理學), as practised by Lê dynasty literati in 18th-century Vietnam (Zhang 2008, 22–26). In his *Collected Comments*, Zhu employed the phrase "humble comment" (*yu'an* 愚按) about 20 times in total throughout the work when introducing his commentaries on specific chapters of the *Analects* (*Chinese Text Project*). By borrowing this phrase, Phạm was indicating his admiration and intellectual debt to Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian philosophy. At the same time, however, the

3 For its analyses, the paper relies on the handwritten copy preserved in the Institute of Han-Nom Studies (Hanoi), call number VHV 349/1–2, reproduced as Phạm (2011), and as part of Phạm (2013, 817–1001).

Humble Comments' distinctive attempt to re-interpret Zhu Xi's ideas can be glimpsed in Phạm's annotations to the original text, and especially in the unusual organizational structure he adopted.

After carefully studying every chapter of the *Analects* in its extant form, Phạm decided to take another step in his autodidactic process: writing comments on the classic. But instead of following the original work's structure, Phạm radically changed the way the chapters were originally arranged. He explained this as follows:

At the risk of being too bold, I have classified its chapters into categories for convenient review. [Based on my classification] the work generally has four books, twenty-three categories, and 493 chapters. In each chapter, my "humble comments" are added below the original main text. Thus, I have named this work *Humble Comments on the Analects*.

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By reorganizing the *Analects* into four books called "Sage" (*Sheng* 聖), "Learning" (*Xue* 學), "Official" (*Shi* 仕), and "Politics" (*Zheng* 政), the *Humble Comments* signalled its author's intent to seek new interpretive insights from the classical text. The relationship between these four books has been construed by modern Vietnamese scholars as an attempt to emphasize the dictum of "Sageliness within, kingliness without" (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) (Đinh 2012, 459–60). The dictum stands as an expression of the Confucian principle of self-cultivation (Zhang 2008; Chu 2009, 47), and Confucian literati can only take office and assume their social responsibilities based on this foundation. Phạm proceeded to break down each of the four topics into sub-topics to further explore a wide array of issues presented through the chapters that record both the Master's and his disciples' words. The chart below summarizes the resulting organizational structure of the *Humble Comments*.

Table 2: The Structure of the Humble Comments on the Analects by Phạm Nguyễn Du.

Book	Category	Number of Chapters
Sage / Thánh 聖 (105 chapters total)	Knowledge (Học vấn 學問)	7
	Dignified Manner (Uy nghi 威儀)	7
	Residing, Dressing and Eating (Cư xử, phục thực 居處服食)	9
	Coping with human affairs and being exemplary to people (Ứng sự phạm vật 應事範物)	30
	Dealing with Changes/Disasters (Xử biến 處變)	7
	Judging people (Thủ nhân 取人)	26
	Talking about Sages (Thuyết thánh 說聖)	8
	Commenting on Sages (Nghị thánh 議聖)	10
	<i>Appendix:</i> Disciples' Records of the Transmission of the Way through Sages (Môn nhân ký quần thánh đạo thống 門人記群聖道統)	1
Learning / Học 學 (202 chapters total)	Extension of Knowledge 1 (Trí tri 致知)	28
	Extension of Knowledge 2	27
	<i>Appendix:</i> Disciples' sayings (Môn nhân ngôn 門人言)	3
	Practising with vigour 1 (Lực hành 力行)	39
	Practising with vigour 2	39
	Practising with vigour 3	19
	<i>Appendices:</i>	
	Disciples' sayings	19
	Disciples' records (Môn nhân ký 門人記)	1
	Filial and fraternal (Hiếu đễ 孝弟)	10
	<i>Appendix:</i> Disciples' sayings	5
	Social intercourse (Giao tế 交際)	6
	<i>Appendices:</i>	
	Disciples' sayings	5
	Disciples' writings for their students	1

Book	Category	Number of Chapters
<i>Ethically Responsible Scholar or Official / Sĩ 仕</i> (45 chapters total)	Upper ethically responsible scholar/Official (Thượng sĩ 上仕)	11
	Middle ethically responsible scholar/Official (Trung sĩ 中仕)	18
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' sayings	6
	Lower ethically responsible scholar/Official (Hạ sĩ 下仕)	8
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' records	2
<i>Politics / Chính 政</i> (141 chapters total)	Self-rectifying (Chính kỷ 正己)	25
	Observing people 1 (Quan nhân 觀人)	28
	Observing people 2	28
	Ritual and music (Lễ nhạc 禮樂)	28
	<i>Appendices</i> :	
	Disciples' sayings	1
	Disciples' records	1
	Governing people (Lâm dân 臨民)	27
	<i>Appendices</i> :	
	Disciples' sayings	1
	Disciples' records	2

At the end of each “book”, Phạm Nguyễn Du summarized his thoughts on the focal topic in a section called “General Statements” (*Tổng thuyết* 總說).⁴ Because of the central importance of these statements to the overall goals of the *Humble Comments*, some discussion of each of them is in order.

In his “General Statements on the Sage”, Phạm recapitulated the line of argumentation in the Book of Sage in three main points. First, he emphasized that the image of the Sage reassembled and reconstructed from various chapters of the *Analects* was a model worthy of emulation. Second, although the Sage had lived thousands of years earlier, Phạm believed that he remained

4 For the original texts of the four “General Statements”, see Appendix B at the end of the paper.

accessible to contemporary readers thanks to his recorded words. Last but not least, Phạm maintained that learning the Way of the Sage was indispensable, because it was both cosmologically immense and humanly pragmatic. For Phạm, this dual quality of the Way – its simultaneous relevance to the entire universe and to the everyday reality of human beings – was precisely what made it so appealing as a model:

This Book solemnly selects factual records of the auspiciously virtuous Sage from the *Analects*. There are one hundred and five chapters, classified into four volumes, by which [the commentator] wants his readers to submissively respect and admire the Sage as if he majestically comes out before [them]. Admiring [the Sage] from a distance, one will have an object worthy of honour; getting closer to him, one will have an object to model after. One's heart-and-mind relies on and turns towards [the Sage] as if a traveller has his home, an archer has his target; as if artisans look around and respectfully listen to their grand master, or as if the myriad beings all together gaze at and simultaneously are supported by the sun and moon, heaven and earth. Neither distracting thoughts nor wishful thinking dare to germinate; nor does one dare to rush to wrong paths or heresies. Alas! Being born a few thousand years later, as for those who pursue the Sage's remaining words, the superior direct their thought to the mysterious, seeking the help of Confucianism [as a medium] to enter Chan (Zen) Buddhism;⁵ the inferior feel content with their official salary, flowing into the degradation without knowing it. Who knows the refined of the Way of the Sage can match with the movements of the limitless and the supreme ultimate, and its unrefined does not go beyond the tangibility of the daily common sense, ritual and music, criminal law and government decrees. The far expansion of the Way spreads over the endless space of the past and present universe, but its near range dwells within the scope of [human activities, such as] coming-in or going-out, actions, eating and drinking.

By positioning the Book of Learning after his discussion of the Sage, Phạm continued his discourse on the model of the Sage, drawing readers' attention to what he saw as its defining feature. By modelling oneself on the Sage, Phạm argued, one was acting not simply to improve and complete one's own learning, but also to improve and complete the learning undertaken by others. Phạm's "General Statements on Learning" reads in part:

5 This reminds us of the relationship between Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Song Neo-Confucianism.

(...) [One should remember] three points on which Zengzi examined himself,⁶ and four things that Yan Yuan avoided when subduing his self;⁷ [these points are:] preserve what you have attained, and pursue what you have not yet been able to achieve; polish and cleanse your heart-and-mind; [and], socialize with humanity to approach what is called “Uprightness”. Alas! At present in responding to humans and other beings, there is nothing other than the constancy of daily moral human relations. What we have on the pages is the heritage of the Master, and all are the instructions to practice the knowledge one has earned. From admiring the Worthy to admiring the Sage, *from completing one's self to completing other human beings* – Confucians' learning is completely comprehensive. (Emphasis mine)

For Phạm, the concept of learning flowed naturally into the idea of ethical and responsible service to society, since serving as an official allowed one to move from self-improvement to facilitating other people's efforts at self-improvement. In *The Book of the Official*, Phạm analysed the ideographic content of the Chinese character for “official”, noting that its two integral components, “scholar” and “human”, constitute the two poles that serve to define the essential meaning of official service. In Phạm's words, “without being ‘scholar’ and ‘human’, it is truly impossible to be an ‘official.’”⁸ To be a good official, moreover, one must constantly strive for self-cultivation. Below is an excerpt from the “General Statements on the Official”:

If directing one's aspiration to the upper rank, one may end up in the middle one; if directing one's aspiration to the middle rank, one unavoidably attains the lower; moreover, if setting one's aspiration to the lower, how can one practice the obligations of the subject, acting according to the humane way, and moving within heaven and earth?

Having linked self-cultivation to the ideal of ethical service, Phạm turned in his fourth and final book to the discussion of “politics”, or the actual practices of governance. For Phạm, the ideal of the self-cultivated official was linked to two

6 Zengzi 曾子 said, “Every day I examine myself on three points: whether if I may have been unfaithful when transacting business for others; whether if I may have been insincere when interacting with friends; and whether if I may have not practised what I have learned” (*Analects*, “Xue er”).

7 When Yan Yuan 顏淵 asked about benevolence, the Master said, “To subdue one's self and return to propriety” (*keji fuli* 克己復禮). Yan ventured to ask about the steps of the process. The Master responded, “Do not look at what is inappropriate to propriety; do not listen to what is inappropriate to propriety; do not speak what is inappropriate to propriety; and do not take any action that is inappropriate to propriety” (*Analects*, “Yan Yuan”).

8 The original reads: 夫「仕」字從「士」從「人」，蓋非士非人，誠不足以言仕也。

other Confucian concepts: the notion of rectification, and the idea of governing according to “the Mean”. Here he offered his own gloss on the well-known claim put forward in the *Analects* that “to govern is to rectify” (“Yan Yuan” 顏淵, 12: 17).⁹ For Phạm, the goal of “rectifying” the practices of a state or royal court to bring them into line with Confucian principles could only be realized if the officials involved were truly committed to their own rectification through self-improvement. As Phạm put it in his “General Statement on Politics”:

The Book of Politics collects the great teachings of the Sage as well as his disciples’ sayings and records regarding politics, one hundred and forty-one (141) chapters in total. Based on the meaning of each chapter, this book classifies them into four categories, “Self-rectifying”, “Observing people”, “Ritual and Music”, and “Governing people”. On the basis of the idea “to govern is to rectify”, the immensity of politics is contained within these four categories, and is rooted in the rectification of the self. Hence, all sagely kings of the ancient past who were “discriminating, uniform in the pursuit of the rightness, and sincerely holding fast the Mean” took self-rectification as the foundation of justification.

Regarding the present structure of the *Analects* simply as the result of randomly collected and diverse written records by and on the Sage into seemingly casually named books that, in general, did not mean much to readers, Phạm Nguyễn Du took it upon himself to rearrange and classify the chapters into specific topics that would have maximum benefit for the learning purposes of the readers. In this way, Phạm aimed to make his reorganization of the *Analects* serve and underscore his emphasis on the primacy of self-cultivation and “learning for the sake of one’s self”:

Do contemporary readers of the *Analects* essentially want to search for the Sage’s instructions, being absorbed in contemplation [of them], experiencing them for themselves, applying them in the universe in order to pursue the [ideal of] “learning for one’s self”? Or do they necessarily want to base themselves on the [current] order of books and chapters, trying to figure out some meanings from this meaningless order, while getting bogged down in its tiny details? If people wish to explore the sage’s instructions by contemplating and quietly appreciating them, by experiencing them within their own bodies, and by applying them in practice in order to pursue the “Learning for the sake of one’s self”, then they should understand this work as an effort at self-teaching, undertaken by me, Thạch Động.

9 The original reads: 政者，正也。

Phạm's rearrangement of the *Analects*' chapters into specific topics proved influential. By the early 20th century, the use of the Romanized alphabetic script as a method of writing Vietnamese had largely displaced the Chinese writing system in Vietnam. To preserve "traditional" values against Western influence, Confucian classics were progressively translated into Vietnamese by the means of the Romanized script. In 1922, the *Analects* was translated for the first time into Vietnamese and printed in Romanized script by the translator Dương Bá Trạc (1884–1944). An anti-colonialist Confucian educator and one of the co-founders of the Free School of Tonkin (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục 東京義塾), Dương Bá Trạc followed in the footsteps of Phạm Nguyễn Du when classifying the chapters into categories. (Dương 1922). Five years later (1927), Lương Văn Can (1854–1927), also a co-founder of the Free School of Tonkin, produced his own translation of the classic, and classified its chapters into sixteen categories (Ôn 1927). Thus, the creative and critical rearrangement/classification model set by Phạm Nguyễn Du for the *Analects* in the 18th century lived on through the practice of a later generation of scholars in early 20th-century Vietnam. To understand the enduring appeal of this model, a closer investigation of Phạm's text is in order – especially those parts of it which suggest the author's transformative learning approach.

The *Humble Comments* as an Example of Transformative Learning

In lieu of a thorough analysis of the entire *Humble Comments*, this paper will focus on Phạm's preface. As we will see, this part of the text can be viewed as Phạm's attempt to mix autobiography with Vietnamese Confucian discourses. Understood in this light, the preface can tell us a great deal about Phạm's transformative learning process.

Phạm opened his preface by recalling the negative impacts of the pressure of preparing for the civil service examination as a teenager. The examination system was often considered a means for people to climb the ladder of success, bringing honour and wealth not only to the successful candidate, but also to his relatives. For Phạm, this state of affairs placed enormous strain on exam candidates. In a later poem, he recalled encountering an entourage of seven boats carrying the relatives of a high-ranking official, and noted that "When a man is appointed as Minister Duke, a hundred of his people are honoured – All are begotten under our Confucian ink brush" (Phạm 2001, 132–4). The pressure to succeed through the examination was thus put on men's shoulders very early in their childhood, and Phạm was no exception.

Although he read the *Analects* during his early adolescence, Phạm confessed that his initial reading of the classic was very superficial, as he concentrated mainly on “the sounds and meanings of its words” and thus failed to “apprehend its significance”. Merging in with the secular trends of his time, Phạm directed his learning to the “syntactic and semantic analysis [of the ancient writings]” for about 25 years. During this long period, he occasionally referred to the *Analects*, but only as a way to show off his erudition. As he explained, “Although I used the book from time to time, it was only to glean and collect bit by bit for the sake of memorization, so in the event that anyone asked, I would have the resources to expound as needed”. However, Phạm’s learning style would change dramatically after he passed the Metropolitan examination and took up responsibilities in the Hanlin Academy and Historiography Institute. Finding himself in the new and unfamiliar role of state official, Phạm became anxious about his “ignorance” of the substance and meaning of good governance. In this time of difficulty, which might be labelled as the first and second of Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning, Phạm returned to the Master’s work as a source of intellectual consolation. As he wrote, “One night, thinking of the *Analects*, I took it out and read it”.

Like the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng 慧能, who became enlightened upon hearing a line from the *Diamond Sutra* (Yampolsky 1967, 133, note 41),¹⁰ Phạm found himself awakened when reaching the sentence “Being at the age of forty or fifty, but not yet making oneself heard of” from the *Analects*. Originally written in the book “Zi Han” 子罕 (9:23),¹¹ the sentence is part of the Master’s saying which Zhu Xi, in his *Collected Comments*, takes as a way “to alert people, to urge them to exert themselves in learning in a timely fashion”.¹² Taken out of its original context, the cited sentence seems to be concerned solely with a man’s career and reputation. However, when reread in context and in association with Zhu Xi’s comments, it conveys an encouragement for learning. For Phạm, this sentence offered a way to make new connections among one’s career, reputation, and learning.

To illustrate these connections in his preface, Phạm mentioned the case of the Song Confucian Xu Heng 許衡 (also known as Xu Luzhai 許魯齋, 1209–1281) as an example of self-reflection and determination to change after

10 The original reads: 應無所住而省其心。

11 The entire chapter reads: “The young generation is awesome. How can we know that the coming generation will not be equal to the present one? But if a person at the age of 40 or 50 has still not been heard of, we should not be in awe of them either.” (後生可畏，焉知來者之不如今也？四十、五十而無聞焉，斯亦不足畏也已。)

12 The original reads: 以警人，使及時勉學也。

recognizing mistakes. He may well have read Xu's biography ("Luzhai xue'an 魯齋學案") in the *Records of Song-Yuan Scholars* (*Song Yuan xue'an* 宋元學案), since he cited 40-year-old Xu's regretful words for having "taught and learned impetuously" (*shoushou menglang* 授受孟浪).¹³ In the first part of Xu's biography, the boy Xu asked his teacher, "For what purpose do we learn?" (*Dushu hewei* 讀書何為) The answer he got was simply: "To take the imperial civil examination" (*Qu kedi er* 取科第耳). Of course, what the teacher said did not satisfy his pupil. Later in life, Xu also became a teacher with a number of students. His intellectual outlook changed radically after his visit to the Neo-Confucian Yao Shu 姚樞 (1201–1278), from whom he learned the Cheng brothers' and Zhu Xi's thoughts. Returning to his school, Xu told his students that what he had previously taught them was not right and should be abandoned, and that they should have a new beginning, starting with Zhu Xi's *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue* 小學), which, in the eyes and words of modern scholars, shows the need "to take responsibility for, to define, and to shape one's self in the context of foregoing environmental factors and relationships" (de Bary 2008, 404). Xu Heng's story, as narrated in Phạm's preface is also a case of transformative learning which encouraged the author to thoroughly review his approach to, and understanding, of learning.

The story of Xu in the preface neatly frames the third and fourth phases of Phạm's own transformative learning process. His rereading of the *Analects* could be seen as the process of the third phase – defined as the "critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions" undertaken by an individual who has achieved a long-cherished goal (in Phạm's case, passing the imperial examination and taking office), only to discover that the achievement does not bring fulfilment. Having examined Xu Heng's radical change in his orientation towards learning, Phạm considers his own circumstances:

Comparing my case with that of Luzhai pursuing the Way, I am still one year younger than him. From now until my old age there remains quite a significant amount of time. Shouldn't I endeavour to move forward, and follow in the footsteps of those who acquire knowledge from predicaments in which they find themselves?

With the comparison of his case to Xu Heng's, Phạm clearly arrived at the fourth phase, in which he recognized that "[his] discontent and the process of transformation [were] shared" with others who "[had] negotiated a similar change" with him. Noteworthy here is Phạm's use of the concept of *khốn tri/kunzhi* 困知 (acquiring true knowledge from predicaments) in describing his circumstances.

13 In "Luzhai xue'an", the phrase originally reads: 昔者授受,殊孟浪也。

Out of Predicaments with True Knowledge

To better understand how *khốn tri/kunzhi* is comprehended in the *Humble Comments*, we turn to Phạm's comments on a particular chapter of the *Analects*. In Chapter 9 of the Book "Jishi 季氏", the Master reviewed four types of people endowed with different learning capabilities. The chapter in question has inspired various interpretations (and thus various translations) for this specific sentence, *kun er xue zhi you qi ci ye* 困而學之又其次也. Below are some examples of how this has been rendered:

J. Legge: "Those who are *dull and stupid*, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these."¹⁴

D.C. Lau: "Next again come those turn to study after having been *vexed by difficulties*" (Confucius 1979, 140).

S. Leys: "Next again come those who learn through the *trials of life*" (Confucius 1997, 83).

Ames and Rosemont: "Something learned *in response to difficulties encountered* is again the next highest" (Confucius 1998, 199).

D. K. Gardner: "Those who learn it but *with difficulty* are next" (Gardner 2003, 41).

E. Slingerland: "Those who *find it difficult to understand* and yet persist in their studies come next" (Confucius 2003, 196).

R. Eno: "Next are those who study it only *in circumstances of duress*" (Eno 2015, 92).¹⁵

Although different from one another, the above-cited translations can be sorted into three groups, depending how each of them interpret the keyword *kun* 困. The first group takes it as an innate characteristic of the learner, such as "dull and stupid" (Legge). Close to the first group, the second understands *kun* as the learner's cognitive ability (Slingerland). But the most common rendering treats *kun* as difficult environments and/or conditions in which the learner acquires new knowledge. It is also worth mentioning that

14 The original reads: 孔子曰：「生而知之者，上也；學而知之者，次也；困而學之，又其次也；困而不學，民斯為下矣。」. James Legge translates this as follows, "Those who are born with the possession of knowledge are the highest class of men. Those who learn, and so, readily, get possession of knowledge, are the next. Those who are dull and stupid, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these. As to those who are dull and stupid and yet do not learn—they are the lowest of the people" (*Chinese Text Project* 2017).

15 All emphases mine.

the same translator may have different interpretations of *kun* depending on the context. Below is Legge's translation of a passage from the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), in which he interpreted *kun* differently,

Knowledge, magnanimity, and energy, these three, are the virtues universally binding. And the means by which they carry the duties into practice is singleness. Some are born with the knowledge of those duties; some know them by study; and some acquire the knowledge *after a painful feeling of their ignorance*. But the knowledge being possessed, it comes to the same thing.¹⁶

Similarly, *khốn/kun* as a key concept in the *Humble Comments* might convey various meanings depending on the context. Unlike what we have seen in the preface, in which *khốn/kun* should represent difficult circumstances, Phạm's comments on Chapter 9 of "Jishi" provide us with a different interpretation:

Human beings possess four ranks of material nature, but they are all people (*dân/min* 民) who hold fast to the law and love virtue. Thus, those who have difficulties but still learn can reach the status of those whose knowledge is inborn. Without learning, the transformation of material nature appears impossible. Falling into difficulties but not learning, one will forever be trapped in difficulties. Thus, although named "the people", they are not part of "the people" in reality.¹⁷

Readers familiar with Neo-Confucianism can easily recognize the terminology employed in Phạm's comments, such as his reference to the concept of "material nature" (*qizhi* 氣質). Imperfect and incomplete (and thus needing refinement), "material nature" is also known as "human psyches and temperaments", (Bell 2008, 80), and placed in opposition to the "original nature" (*benxing* 本性), the perfect and good nature preserved in human subconsciousness (Lee 2010, 129–53). As for the "original nature", through Phạm's comments, it can be identified as the nature of Heavenly pattern (*tianli zhi xing* 天理之性), another vital Neo-Confucian concept. Based on Confucius' belief that "men are nearly alike by nature" and Mencius' theory of "humans beings are good by nature", Phạm believed the following:

At the beginning, both the noble person and the petty person have the nature of heavenly pattern. Protecting the pattern, one will ascend and

16 The original reads: 知仁勇三者，天下之達德也，所以行之者一也。或生而知之，或學而知之，或困而知之，及其知之，一也。Emphasis mine. (*Chinese Text Project* 2017)

17 The *Humble Comments*, Book of "Learning", vol. 7; the original reads: 人有四等氣質，然均之秉彝好德之民。故困而學可以至於生知。變化氣質非學不能也。困而不學，乃終於困，名曰民而實非民矣。

become the noble person; losing the pattern, one will descend and turn to be the petty person. When the least bit of difference has occurred, heaven and earth automatically become apart.¹⁸

Furthermore, the “material nature” in Phạm’s comments is subsequently linked to the “people”, a move which has its origin in the *Classics of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經). The poem titled “Zhengmin 烝民” from this collection reads:

Heaven, in giving birth to the multitudes of the people,	天生烝民、
To every faculty and relationship annexed its law.	有物有則。
The people possess this normal nature,	民之秉彝、
And they [consequently] love its normal virtue.	好是懿德。

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Based on this poem, Phạm talks about people under heaven who by their “original nature” should be able to “hold fast to the law and love virtue”. This also reminds us of Zhu Xi’s concept of “Heaven’s people” (*tian min* 天民) who are all the same in possessing the commiserating mind-and-heart (Hon 2012, 16). However, this potential equality turns out to be almost impossible in practice, due to differences among their “material natures”. In this case, Phạm obviously follows Zhu Xi’s line of thought on the uneven endowments of material nature that result in the unequal learning capabilities seen in human beings. Commenting on the same chapter of “Jishi”. Zhu Xi explains:

Kun 困 means that there is something obstructed. The passage indicates that since people’s material natures are not the same, there exist these four ranks in general. Yang [Shi, 楊時] said, “From being born with the possession of knowledge, learning and getting possession of knowledge to getting possession of knowledge with difficulties due to personal imperfection, although their material natures are not the same, their [acquired] knowledge is identical. Hence, the noble man only treasures learning as precious. Thus, being entrapped in difficulties by imperfect material nature but not learning accordingly is regarded as inferior.”¹⁹ (*Chinese Text Project* 2017)

Thus, Phạm’s willingness to put himself “after *kunzhi* people” can be construed as his self-identification with those who were born with limited “material nature” and acquired knowledge from the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves. This realization was undoubtedly a critical landmark in his

18 The original reads: 君子小人其初皆具天理之性。保其理則上而為君子。失其理則下而為小人。毫釐一分，天壤自隔。

19 The original reads: 困，謂有所不通。言人之氣質不同，大約有此四等。楊氏曰：「生知學知以至困學，雖其質不同，然及其知之一也。故君子惟學之為貴。困而不學，然後為下。」

life. Having achieved this insight, Phạm decided to “abolish learning for the purpose of the civil service examination”, and instead began carrying the *Analects* with him day and night. This was the fifth phase of transformative learning (“Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions”), and the beginning of Phạm’s new journey of “learning for the sake of one’s self”.

The *Humble Comments* and “Learning for the Sake of One’s Self”

During Phạm Nguyễn Du’s lifetime, a series of “abridged” (*tiết yếu* 節要) Confucian texts, including the Four Books and Five Classics, emerged. The series’ compiler was Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744–1818), a high-ranking official and contemporary and acquaintance of Phạm Nguyễn Du. Bùi abridged not only the Four Books and Five Classics, but also Neo-Confucian works, such as the *Great Compendia of Nature and Principle* (*Xingli daquan* 性理大全). As the purpose of this series was to help Confucian students prepare for the civil service examination, it was widely reprinted several times by various printing houses throughout the 19th century. A preface to the series found in the first book of the *Abridged Four Books – The Great Learning* (*Tứ thư tiết yếu – Đại học* 四書節要—大學, reprinted in 1850) confirms that the series was designed to help candidates in their preparation for the exam (*tiện ư quyết khoa nhi dĩ* 便於決科而已). The preface also distinguishes “learning for the sake of argumentation” (*nghĩa lý chi học* 義理之學) from “learning for the sake of the examination” (*khoa cử chi học* 科舉之學). According to the preface,

Learning for the sake of the examination and learning for the sake of argumentation are not the same. Learning for the sake of argumentation moves from erudition to simplicity, whereas learning for the sake of the examination focuses only on simplicity. Therefore, the latter takes the entirety of the classics and their commentaries and abridges them.²⁰

Another preface printed in the first book of the *Abridged Five Classics – The Classic of Documents* (*Ngũ kinh tiết yếu – Thư kinh* 五經節要—書經, reprinted in 1842) stated:

Learning for the sake of the examination concentrates on the comprehension of the script, often abridging and simplifying it to prioritize memorization and preparation for the examination.²¹

20 The original reads: 科舉之學與義理之學不同。義理之學必自博而之約，科舉之學則主於約。故取經傳之全而節之。

21 The original reads: 科舉之學專於理會文字，往往節而約之以優記誦、備決科。

Solemnly printed in large-size characters at the beginning of every subset in this popular series, the perception communicated in the prefaces of the differences between the two learning styles must have reflected a common belief in elite Vietnamese circles at the time. Moreover, the popularity of the abridged series was evidence of the tendency of “learning for the sake of the examination” in society. Led partly by Bùi Huy Bích’s series, this tendency undoubtedly went against what Phạm Nguyễn Du was aiming at, namely “learning for the sake of one’s self”.

For Phạm Nguyễn Du, the two contrasting forms of learning reflect the mindsets of two differing personalities. Commenting on Chapter 6:13 of the *Analects*, “You should be a *ru* 儒 scholar after the style of the noble person, and not after that of the petty person”,²² Phạm Nguyễn Du states that:

After Confucius and Mencius, people who learn to become Confucian are numerous; but since their mindsets are false and not genuine, consequently their learning is only for the sake of reputation and fortune, and is not based on [the improvement of] the self to serve magnanimous affairs. In general, seeking knowledge turns people into the noble person, when being anxious [for reputation and fortune] changes people into the petty person. The tiny space existing in the contention between the principle and the temperament entails the difference between the two types of the noble person and the petty person.²³

In a poem titled “Presented to Tồn Am” (Ký trình Tồn Am 寄呈存庵), Phạm addressed a statement on his purpose of learning directly to Bùi:²⁴

為己既能希孔孟

[Learning] for the sake of one’s self, one has modelled oneself on the examples of Confucius and Mencius;

逢辰應不愧皋夔

Finding oneself at a right time, one should not be ashamed with Gao Yao and Kui.²⁵

22 “Yong ye 雍也” (6:13) of the *Analects*: 子謂子夏曰：「女為君子儒，無為小人儒。」

23 The original reads: 孔孟之後，世之學為如者多矣，惟其立心偽而不真，故其學只為名譽利祿，不於自己分上事。蓋為學則同於君子而操心則入於小人，所爭理欲一毫之間，遂有君子小人兩樣之別。

24 Tồn Am is the literary name of Bùi Huy Bích. The poem is in the collection called Anthology of Poetry from the Imperial Việt (*Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* 皇越詩選), also compiled by Bùi.

25 Gao Yao was the legal officer of the legendary emperor Shun, who also appointed Kui as the music master.

Even though the context of this admiring poem remains unknown, it was certainly no accident that Phạm chose to offer a critical commentary on the goal of learning when learning for the sake of the examination had already become a trend. For Zhu Xi, even though the sages and worthies had numerous discussions on the objective of learning, none of them were as essential as Confucius' oft-cited dictum: "Learners of the ancient time learned for the sake of [cultivating] themselves; nowadays learners learn for the sake of [pleasing] others."²⁶ Based on the Master's dictum, the phrase "Learning for the sake of one's self" became one of the most central themes for Neo-Confucians. Zhu Xi even employed it as an important criterion to identify who should be included in his circle of fellow scholars. An advocate of this spirit, Phạm would base his learning agenda on Zhu Xi's tradition.

Having established the new goal for his learning, Phạm Nguyễn Du undertook to devise a concrete agenda, which he tried to realize through a rereading of the *Analects*. As described in the preface, having resolutely abandoned "learning for the examination" (*cử tử học* 舉子學), Phạm read the *Analects* in three stages. First, he read the main text repeatedly until becoming intimately familiar with it (*shoudu* 熟讀). The term *shoudu* employed in this specific context is actually also a key term in the *Conversations with Master Zhu, Arranged Topically* (*Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類), especially in the sections on reading. According to Zhu Xi, becoming intimately familiar with a text means the reader taking it into their heart-and-mind, an embodiment process that requires both physical experiences of and deep reflections on the focal subject. As stated in *Conversations with Master Zhu*:

Generally speaking, in reading, we must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seem to come from our own mouths. We should then continue to reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from our minds. Only then can there be real understanding. (Chu 1990, 135)²⁷

Using this specific term, Phạm clearly shared the same thoughts with Zhu Xi, as the first stage of his reading method implied direct contact with and independent understanding of the text without assistance from any intermediary.

In the second and third stages of his reading, Phạm reread the *Analects* with the help of the *Collected Commentaries*, and later, in consultation with the

26 The original reads: 子曰：「古之學者為己，今之學者為人。」 ("Xianwen 憲問", *Analects*, 14:24). Zhu Xi's original line reads: 其說多矣，然未有如此言之切而要者 (*Collected Commentaries*).

27 The original reads: 大抵觀書先須熟讀，使其言皆若出於吾之口；繼以精思，使其意皆若出於吾之心，然後可以有得爾。

annotations made by other Confucian scholars. This appears similar to the method described in *Conversations with Master Zhu*, which recommends reading commentaries only after the attainment of intimate familiarity with the text. In Zhu Xi's words, the order should go as follows: "At the moment I'm not even speaking about the recitation of commentaries; let's simply recite the classical texts to the point of intimate familiarity" (Chu 1990, 138).²⁸

The way Phạm studied the *Analects* was thus very much in line with Zhu Xi's reading method. According to Zhu Xi, if people do not read a classical text in this manner, their understanding of it will remain superficial: "the words will be hollow and learning will not be for their own sake, as is now the case with those preparing for the examinations" (Chu 1990, 156).

Besides the *Humble Comments*, Phạm Nguyễn Du's thoughts on "learning for the sake of one's self" are also well presented in a poem entitled "Bequeathed to Phạm Lập Trai, Who Passed the Imperial Examination in the Same Year as the Author"²⁹ (Di đồng niên Phạm Lập Trai 遺同年范立齋). The poem reads:

Memorizing well the remainder [of the teachings of the sages],
記誦得緒餘

Holding fast to them but losing their true subtleties,
攀持失真妙

People are remote in time and space from the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius,
悠悠孔孟意

And [the thoughts of the masters] increasingly become vague and unclear to them.

日望益幽渺

[Following such a learning method], people will ruin their intention,
以此壞心術

Run into the apertures of fame and gain,
走入聲利竅

28 The original reads: 而今未說讀得注，且只熟讀正經。As a breakthrough, the first and direct reading of a text requires great effort, and the consultation of commentaries should only come later. Zhu Xi reminds us that, "You must take the classical text and read it till you've become intimately familiar with it. Savor each and every word until you know its taste. If there are passages you don't understand, ponder them deeply, and if you still don't get them, then read the commentaries—only then will the commentaries have any significance" (ibid., 155).

29 Lập Trai 立齋 is the literary name of Phạm Quý Thích 范貴適 (1760–1825), who passed the civil service examination and earned the title "presented scholar", *jinshi* 進士, at the age of 19 in 1779. Like Phạm Nguyễn Du, he was uncooperative with the Tây Sơn.

And even until their death, remain unaware of its danger.

到死不自覺

This is both regrettable and mournful.

可嘆復可悼

I am glad that at your young age,

我喜君年髫

Through learning, you already found the gist [of the teachings].

學已見大要

Various schools of thinkers have discussed [the classics] in succession,

百家談紛紛

As a mixed assembly of disciples in chaos.

雜進徒擾擾

As gem-like stones, they can be thousands though,

雖累千砒砒

But can any small piece of preciousness be found among them?

何如一寸寶

Why don't we go back to the essence [of the teachings],

曷不反精義

Probing [into the texts], gradually analysing and understanding them?

探討漸剖瞭

When the latent has been revealed and honoured,

蘊蓄既寵遂

It will expand, exposing its depth and vastness.

克擴自汪浩

Confucians of the Song and Yuan dynasties had gone ahead,

宋元諸儒先

Closing the door and carefully studying [the classics].

閉門事講究

[Traveling on] the great road, one really looks up [to the high hill].

景行實在仰

All of the profound teachings can be examined

微訓皆可考

And traced back up to their sources.

淵源邈以上

The effects [of this learning method] are not small, indeed.

功用良非少

If the cause of truth does not perish,
斯文苟不喪

With it, one can rise again from decline and failure.
相與起衰倒

The last two lines in the poem are unmistakably based on Chapter 9.5 of the *Analects*. In that chapter, the Master remained fearless when facing threats because he confidently considered himself the embodiment of this culture.³⁰ Similarly, Phạm placed himself in a comparable position of a follower of the Way, who had learned and experienced the Sage's teaching, holding fast to and finally practising it in his life. The poem nicely summarizes the last five phases of Phạm's transformative learning process, whose starting point is "Learning for the sake of one's self".

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“Learning for the Sake of One's Self” in Modern Contexts

Determining the precise contexts of all Confucius' sayings, made thousands of years ago, remains an impossible task. In his discussion of the difficulties of contextualizing Confucian classics, Tu Wei-Ming mentions the dictum of “learning for the sake of one's self” as an example of this arduous task:

The challenge all members of the scholarly community who are actively involved in comparative studies must face is whether or not, in principle, we can really understand such a deceptively simple Confucian statement as “learning is for the sake of the self” out of context. The answer, unfortunately, must be in the negative. We cannot know what it means if we do not situate it in its proper context. (Tu 1985, 54)

However, besides their efforts in reconstructing the contexts of the sayings, people often try to read the Master's words into their contemporary contexts. It is not difficult to see that both Zhu Xi and Phạm Nguyễn Du advocated “learning for the sake of one's self” on similar grounds, working against the socio-educational evils of their times, which were learning exclusively for the sake of the civil service examination, for personal

30 The chapter reads: “The Master was put in fear in Kuang. He said, ‘After the death of King Wen, was not the cause of truth lodged here in me? If Heaven had wished to let this cause of truth perish, then I, a future mortal, should not have got such a relation to that cause. While Heaven does not let the cause of truth perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?’” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017).

career-advancement and interest, and nothing else.³¹ As pointed out by de Bary, Zhu Xi's thoughts started and ended with the goal of "learning for the sake of one's self" (de Bary 1991, 31), and the same is true of Phạm Nguyễn Du. They both read, understood, and carried Confucius' dictum into their contemporary contexts.

Although still trying to reconstruct the socio-political and cultural contexts of the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" (Kuang 2012, 27–37), modern scholars seem more interested in its potential impact on contemporary society (if it were to be widely taught and embraced). Bian Shiyang believes that Confucian "learning for the sake of one's self" has nothing to do with vulgar individualism that is now popularly understood as striving egoistically for the benefit of oneself. On the contrary, it is the need to morally cultivate and perfect the self which is the core of strong human relationships (Bian 2005, 124).

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Based on the same understanding, Li Can feels the urgency to recover and strengthen the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" in order to fight against utilitarianism, as well as the need to revivify it to reinforce the interactive effects of the "college humanistic quality education model". Li even goes further, and criticizes the abuse of multimedia in college teaching that can weaken the thinking abilities of the student, and suggests that the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" could be a way to reduce the overdependence of college teaching and learning on multimedia sources – one that can enhance the proactivity of the learners (Li 2015, 49; 2011, 17–20; 2010, 122–25).

Huang Jianhua and Wang Derong examine the principle in connection with Zhu Xi's *Learning Regulations of Bailudong Academy* (*Bailudong shuyuan xuegui* 白鹿洞書院學規). As Zhu Xi's Academy took the principle of "learning for the sake of one's self" as an integral part of its spirit, it emphasized three key issues: the cultivation of morality, the pursuit of the self-improvement of virtues, and the realization of an ideal personality. Like Xiao Qunzhong and other Chinese scholars (Xiao 2002, 5–9; Li 2008, 77–80), Huang and Wang see this traditional moral education trend as advantageous in modern society, because it can contribute to training a healthy personality, constructing a harmonious social environment, improving the self-consciousness and initiative of the moral subject, and removing utilitarian and

31 Here is Zhu Xi's description of what was happening in his time: "But in today's world what fathers encourage in their sons, what older brothers exhort in their younger brothers, what teachers impart to their students, and what students all study for is nothing more than to prepare for the civil service examinations" (de Bary 1991, 32).

instrumentalist tendencies from modern education (Huang 2012, 18–21).³² Other scholars, such as Zhou Zhixiang and Zhu Hanmin, also study Zhu Xi's perception of the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self", concluding that for Zhu, this tradition is both the goal and foundational principle of learning, and that the purpose of Zhu's interpretation of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) is to theorize and systematize the tradition, as well as to implement it in his annotated text (Zhou 2011, 34–39). The principle is also studied in relation with Kant's concepts of moral self-discipline and freedom (Wen 2006, 63–70).

Since the tradition/principle of "learning for the sake of one's self" has travelled far beyond national boundaries, it has been practised and studied not only within China, but also in other countries in East Asia. In Korea, the eminent Neo-Confucian Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570, more widely known as Yi T'oegye 李退溪), had his understanding of the tradition linked directly to the study of the heart-and-mind (*simhak* 心學), which was systematized in the Study of Principle (*lihak* 理學) and centred on Substance-Function (*cheyong* 體用) (Lee 2010, 165–90). Studying the influence of the Cheng brothers' interpretation of the principle "learning for the sake of one's self" on Korean educational philosophy, Jang Jing Ho focuses on the case of Yi T'oegye, and concludes that the revivification of this tradition could be used to counter certain problems in contemporary education, such as egoism, commercialism, and the worship of money (Zhang 2002, 75–78).

The case of Phạm Nguyễn Du suggests that the notion of "learning for the sake of one's self" is both similar to and different from these latter-day attempts to revive the term as a principle of learning. Among Phạm's many elucidations of the dictum, his comments on Chapter 9:30 ("Zi Han 子罕") of the *Analects* are worth considering. Here he stated:

When understanding that learning is for the sake of one's self, one will be able to put forth one's strength conscientiously; hereafter one can believe in right principles with firmer sincerity;³³ hereafter one can stand erect in the middle without inclining to either side;³⁴ hereafter one can

32 There are a number of essays written in the same vein, such as Pang (2010, 8–9).

33 Chapter 19.2 ("Zizhang 子張") from the *Analects* reads: "Zi Zhang said, "When a man holds fast to virtue, but without seeking to enlarge it, and *believes in right principles, but without firm sincerity* (信道不篤), what account can be made of his existence or non-existence?" (*Chinese Text Project* 2017; emphasis mine).

34 The *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*) records a conversation between Confucius and Zilu

suit one's actions to changing conditions. The attainment of this level is already the sage's affair.³⁵

For Phạm, “learning for the sake of one's self” is the foundation of the long process of becoming a sage. With the right motivation, he believed, a person will invest all efforts into the perfection of the self and knowledge. Self-cultivation and knowledge learning are thus processes that require the learner to use critical observation and analysis to verify the truthfulness of what he has learned. Only in such conditions can the learner accept and live up to the verified “right principles with firmer sincerity”. This critical mind helps to prevent any biases, helping the follower of the Way to “stand erect in the middle without inclining to either side”. Standing unbiased subsequently allows the sage-to-be to act flexibly according to any given circumstances when holding fast to his right principles. This depiction of this lifelong learning process can serve as advice that is universally applicable to anyone who sincerely wishes to become more morally cultivated, intellectually improved, and socially engaged. Thus, besides reading the dictum into contemporary contexts and employing it as a way to fight against egoism, commercialization, corruption, and other negative practices in modern education, Phạm's thoughts on the motto “Learning for the sake of one's self” presented in his *Humble Comments* can inspire us with suggestions of how to live this motto to the fullest.

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Conclusion

As a theory of adult learning, transformative learning theory allows us a deeper look into the intellectual life of Phạm Nguyễn Du and his *Humble Comments*, helping us to identify Phạm's deep shift in perspective from “learning for the sake of others” to “learning for the sake of one's self”. His transformative learning process was a long-running attempt to find true knowledge in the predicaments and circumstances in which he found himself. Although his chosen path to Confucian sagehood was long and difficult, Phạm was determined to take it. By intensively reading the *Analects* in the light of Neo-Confucian philosophy and in the context of civil-war-torn 18th-century Vietnam, Phạm completed what would later be formalised as Mezirow's ten phases of the transformative

子路 on energy (*qiang* 強), in which the Master states, “The superior man cultivates a friendly harmony, without being weak. How firm is he in his energy! He *stands erect in the middle, without inclining to either side* (中立而不倚). How firm is he in his energy!” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017; emphasis mine).

35 The original reads: 知學為己，則能切實用力，然後能信道愈篤，然後能中立不倚，然後能達權與變。至是己為聖人之事矣。

learning procedure. Powerful and encouraging, Phạm's story is an example of how a pre-modern Vietnamese member of the literati could read a Confucian classic and adapt Neo-Confucianism to the socio-cultural and historical conditions in which he lived.

Viewed in this light, Phạm's career and work offer a valuable perspective on the question of whether and how Confucian tradition(s) of learning can contribute to the acquisition of knowledge and self-cultivation in the information age. Phạm's agenda of "learning for the sake of one's self" does not mean egoism; instead, it reflects the quest for self-improvement as a means to promote positive social change. Phạm urged the learner not to blindly believe in and dogmatically repeat what she has learned, but to experiment and draw out meaningful lessons from her own experience. Moreover, the unconventional organization of *Humble Comments* reflects Phạm's commitment to the ideal of independent and creative thinking. Phạm's work thus offers us an opportunity to see Confucianism as a vibrant literary and philosophical tradition – a tradition that many in Vietnam and elsewhere have used to reflect critically on some of the most pressing issues of our contemporary era.

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Appendix A

Phạm Nguyễn Du's "Preface" to the *Humble Comments on the Analects* (from *Luận Ngữ Ngụ Án* 論語愚案, preserved in the library of the Institute of Han-Nom Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam, VHV.349/1-2).

論語愚案自序
欽年十二家公使讀論語經究其音義而未能知味也稍長
為場屋所驅專事章句文字之學以提時好與論語相遠
幾三去矣時或就卷不過勾指推務為記憶待訪問擬
實肥腴而已聖賢旨義茫然莫能自懷亦未嘗有發
之者或成于九輪宛然猶散沙以狂想懷恣睢一夕思思論語
取讀至四十五十無聞句恍然知多方覺排細知有所未衆
日既而卒然曰昔曾子許曾子許曾子許曾子許曾子許
為時道居居於吾觀曾子許曾子許曾子許曾子許曾子許
更有許多年矣獨不可努力力何前以自托于困知之後耶

於是浸思浸思參字學朝夕以論語自隨先燕讀正文少讀
集註必盡諸儒說逐章玩味不捨重復讀之凡漸漸開
遂深嗜而力求焉觀不自撥括出諸類以便觀覽凡為第四
為類于三篇章四百九十三段章五文下附以愚按因以論語
愚按名之自是年夏起庚子冬乃成辭之多實公暇取玩
有未盡處輒復更展期以老乃敢問世或曰論語聖人所記
却二十篇子取而改篇是類能不為後論所罪歟則又曰朱
周云論語孔子弟子嘗雜記其言而卒成其書意曾子弟子
聖門

更有許多年矣獨不可努力力何前以自托于困知之後耶
於是浸思浸思參字學朝夕以論語自隨先燕讀正文少讀
集註必盡諸儒說逐章玩味不捨重復讀之凡漸漸開
遂深嗜而力求焉觀不自撥括出諸類以便觀覽凡為第四
為類于三篇章四百九十三段章五文下附以愚按因以論語
愚按名之自是年夏起庚子冬乃成辭之多實公暇取玩
有未盡處輒復更展期以老乃敢問世或曰論語聖人所記
却二十篇子取而改篇是類能不為後論所罪歟則又曰朱
周云論語孔子弟子嘗雜記其言而卒成其書意曾子弟子
聖門

聖性德知之不足行也上學聖教以達先意曾子曰吾日
三省吾身此論語大法也若使知我者取焉而并其語于
書手藏之庚子冬敬書于京北月德江之修德閣
海陽華堂范正齊筆點

重出但如鄉黨篇收十五節及從集註內三章別為一章為
百九十三章章雖以類散逐章必皆註當名而不沒其
說集註以發其意亦謹重之所為也其節曰聖曰學曰
子曰以聖人為德格言則於門人所言所記則於後
賢屬有法度學者為求類就類求其微章求其旨以歸
然不謂之有功而謂之有罪可乎故謂此書余固而願學
人之鑑也不敢自以為功余不取自以為罪諸君無論此作之
功罪盡密語之是非客既去攸抱卷悲夫孔子沒論語存
邇來當日忘也聖賢既遠吾誰與語莊誦遺言彷彿

Appendix B:

"General Statements on the Sage."

配三聖五帝三王之而下貽國家生民千萬世無窮之
安學者用之進足以致居澤民樹立不朽遠足以修己
教人俯仰無愧於哉道乎備於聖之身而散見於
聖之書聖聖遠書存於世則見書亦猶見聖也觀見
聖亦弗克由聖可不知所言聖哉

崇後言高者馳心玄妙搜儒而入於禪非有見於
於活下而不自覺孰知聖人之道其精則足以配無極
太極之運而其粗不出日用尋倫禮樂刑政之具其
遠則磅礴古今乎出之不可窮際而其近不出起居
動休飲食之間其事上賤下愚仁愛之類其至而
進退辭受之義則千乘萬壘夢天下之可敬者不足
以動其心其處已接物溫和平易而剛大直方之氣則
非千鈞萬鈞雷霆斧鉞之所能威聽其言者無且
多效目前之利而天子用之可以齊家治國平天下

為言教一統相續傳之無窮於尚書見堯舜湯武之
事崇於論語見夫子之事崇於孟子見
聖賢總說
此篇雖取論語中所記聖人盛德事是凡一百五章為
四卷欲讀者端詳景仰如聖人履臨乎前望之而有
所尊仰之而有所準其心一於依歸其心一於向赴知行
者之有象射者之有的如群工之環視拱聽乎大匠如
萬物之繫瞻望乎天地日月無刻念妄息之微靡
不以其端之最趨也嗚呼生於數千載之後求聖人之

"General Statements on Learning."

致知力行者身文際隨章盡而類分之補斯言想若其
聖門高第親炙於江漢秋陽太和氣而為魯之三
賢之心守其所已得求其未能居潛吾心周旋人道以
致所謂正心誠意目而居禮無非禮倫日常田之常
上餘師無非心得斯行之教而希賢而希聖自成已而
成人儒者之要無餘焉夫

如此後世則以識下為惡矣
附門人記諸弟子一章
崇也愚也巴魯師也師也
愚按此章先儒以為聖人之言指四守之他內深密之
也然求之四偏之中則師之無實此之無文其局最微
匠而愚者之居學者之定偏中自有是處宜乎曾能
傳道崇能近道而師與終終不至欺
學篇總說
此篇雖取論語中論學處凡一百二章為六卷間以

“General Statements on the Official.”

諸天地本諸人心士之未仕則學事君之道既仕則行所
學以事君有志於上猶得其志易志於下不免為下又
況所志既下其何以行臣是合人道俯仰於天地間為臣
臣道無非至訓求之則得捨之則亡願以此望士大
夫而所以自勵

仕篇總說
此篇謹取論語中聖人賢人小人之衷凡四十五章分上
中下類為三卷以為仕者之鑒或夫仕者從士從人蓋非士非
人誠不足以言仕也聖人以用行捨藏為典則當高
才如仲由棄捨之甚于賈隱士之疑皆未足以語此仕之
單的捨茲其何適歟至君子之有道當仲有仁者
之功史魚之直武子之愚公叔之什家臣則謂之見人
當中之勉進者聖人亦各有取裁其餘謂之具臣謂之
病佚謂之鄙夫臣聞以此可以悚惕矣嗟大君臣大夫

“General Statements on Politics.”

已正則萬目舉一歪不正則萬目駭執此以求古後
盛衰治亂之迹鏡鑑效燭燭然在掌為政者小
月之已正亦太用之國天下都不外是用乎是故

多士為士同母亦何其有是故為國者莫急於立
教或不
政篇總說
古政篇以全人大綱及門人所言所記凡關於政者共一百四
十一章各因章意分正己觀人孔樂臨民四類報政者正己之
意則政之大無出此四者而其本在乎正己是以古先聖王
惟德惟仁為執厥中皆正己底道理事者君若一辰
法或要精焉世宗廟以正己底道理事者君若一辰
發擇於經傳而長存於日用常行間無非一己之性

PART II, PRACTICE:

**CONTEMPORARY
IMPLICATIONS**

Kirill Ole THOMPSON

Lessons from Zhu Xi's Views on Inquiry and Learning for Contemporary Advanced Humanities Education and Research

We don't read poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. So medicine, law, business, engineering... these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love... These are what we stay alive for. (Kleinbaum 1989)

Whenever we proceed from the known into the unknown, we may hope to understand but we may have to learn at the same time a new way of understanding. (Werner Heisenberg)

Abstract

We are bearing witness to the rapid rise of a brave new world of education as flashy websites and interactive software replace individual study and classroom lectures. The expansion of college lecture halls has been stretched thin with video lessons and distance

learning, and the siren call of massive open online courses (MOOCs) by star Ivy League professors renders the traditional classroom barren in the eyes of savvy students who have the system pegged.

Several questions arise in this context. Can the students of today receive a college education in the full sense? Does learning still have the same quality without close interactions with teachers and classmates in small to medium sized classrooms? Does research hold the same significance today when much of the work is done and so much information supplied by computers? What lessons do Zhu Xi's teachings on inquiry and learning have for this educational world of e-texts and cyber-lessons? While not a Luddite tract, the present study raises questions and concerns about the goals and conduct of higher education today which, as Heisenberg avers, should not only aim at transmitting knowledge understood in set ways, but also at inculcating new ways of thinking and understanding.

A college education, which Zhu Xi would term "advanced learning", is as much about cultivating a thoughtful, responsible person as producing a professional expert. Such education should include cultivating a student's sensitivity, logic, and judgment, as well as knowledge about humanity, society, and the world. It is often forgotten that such sensitivity, logic, knowledge, and commitment not only make the student more thoughtful and responsible, in short more self-conscious, but also give her additional perspectives and enhance her professional expertise.

Keywords: Zhu Xi, the humanities, advanced research, self-consciousness, moral perspective

Introduction

We contemporary scholars feel empowered by our access to digitized data and research materials, not to mention the research aids, search engines, and data crunchers at our fingertips. We enjoy unprecedented data reach and computational capacity, as well as tools for compiling and arranging materials for our research work and writing. Indeed, I can only imagine the sorts of digital research paper templates now available, and wonder what would Zhu Xi make of these rich data troves and analytic tools? How would he assess the computer assisted approaches people now take in conducting research, reflection, and writing, in the humanities in particular?¹ Would he

1 I highlight humanities research, reflection, and writing in particular because they are construed to have, to a certain extent, a cultivational, humanizing effect on the researcher/writer (Nussbaum 1998). Research, reflection, and writing in other fields should have this effect, as well, in terms of the logic and values involved in conducting research, reflection, and writing with honest objectivity, yet with a sense of compassion and good purpose. Humanities research, reflection, and writing tend to involve additional personal self-examination and value reflections.

regard it as adaptable to one's larger purpose of dedicated self-cultivation and person-making, or as inimical to this?²

One might respond that Zhu Xi's notion of inquiry and learning is closely bound up with his concept of self-realization under a specific set of values and cultural practices, at some remove from the free-spirited, liberal sort of education that typifies this day and age. For the present discussion, however, let us grant that Zhu Xi's value orientation and notion of knowledge and learning are sufficiently general to be relevant for assessing the advanced level approaches to research, reflection, and writing that are now adopted, and especially in the humanities.

Believing that nature and human life operate according to given sets of patterns, formations, and principles, which make them essentially understandable,³ Zhu Xi would tend to consider that "humanities" research, reflection, and writing in general should elicit similar sets of patterns and formations, and provoke, whether implicitly or explicitly, similar patterns of cultivation, humanizing self-reflection, development, and realization. That is, while Zhu Xi does adhere to a specific set of Confucian values, cultural practices, and cultivation goals, we here make the assumption that he would tend to see similar sets of values, practices, and goals in play in almost any sincerely and openly conducted humanities reflection, research, and writing. I would venture to add that university and advanced level humanities research and writing in today's universities are thought to involve a project of self-cultivation, reflection, and realization as the student/researcher *ipso facto* breaks through her original naive, parochial, biased views and values along the way to establishing the epistemic objectivity, value awareness, and authority necessary for preparing her dissertation, launching her career, and becoming a fully responsible, self-conscious human being.⁴

- 2 In the Southern Song, Zhu Xi was already concerned that the easy availability of mass printed books was detrimental to learning and cultivation, for students increasingly no longer needed to memorize and recite texts or take them so deeply to heart. He also feared the proliferation of commentaries that could be misleading as often as they were enlightening.
- 3 Zhu Xi understood these patterns and formations as mapped into focus-fields, *li-qi* (理氣) orders and aesthetic order, and as manifested variously and to be discerned in diverse lights and perspectives. On focus-field and aesthetic order, see Hall and Ames (1987). On *li-qi* orders, see Thompson (2015, 150–6).
- 4 Back in the 1970s, some professors of metaethics stressed that metaethical analysis was purely objective, and to be conducted irrespective of any particular set of normative rules. One professor of mine even gave the example of the ethicist McTaggart, a century earlier, shooting neighborhood cats in the night, arguing that the best metaethical analyst might have no personal ethical commitments. At the time, colleagues and graduate students countered that simply by virtue of being a responsible member of a family, community, etc., such an analyst

Cultural and Cultivational Context of Zhu Xi's Approach to Inquiry and Learning

Zhu Xi's approach to inquiry and learning is bound up with what he regards as the core cultivation efforts of abiding in *jing* 敬 (reverence), nurturing the root, and examining the self. For the present considerations, we can regard *jing* as covering the attitudes of concentration, openness, and alertness. Mindfulness has been offered as a suggestive cover term for *jing* cultivation and practice.⁵ Nurturing the root is about preserving one's native moral propensities, sense of fairness, and impulse toward goodness and truth.⁶ It is to free oneself of acquired prejudices, biases and self-centeredness.⁷ Moreover, self-examination refers to assessing the probity of one's motivations and the sincerity of one's intentions, particularly in learning and inquiry in this case, but also in one's life conduct in general. Moreover, Zhu Xi also came to understand that, in order to have purpose and be fruitful, one's inquiry and learning need to have dedication and purpose, so he stressed establishing resolve (*lizhi* 立志) as crucial, and cast off his practice of offering learning packages or outlines:

...it is essential for learners to establish resolve. Consider the saying, "Strive to restore the roots of one's basic propensities (*xing* 性) and endowment (*ming* 命),⁸ aspire to surpass the achievements of the sages and worthies." One who establishes resolve will make determined efforts. It doesn't do to just aim to be a good person and rest content after realizing several *daoli* (道理, general truisms).⁹ Such a person won't

would still recognize and follow basic normative rules that make civilized life possible. Virtually all humanities disciplines deliver insight into the importance of values and rules. The best metaethicist should thus know the importance of values and rules in her bones.

- 5 I use the Romanized Chinese term *jing* 敬 in the following, taking reverence or reverential regard as the core, and concentration, seriousness, and mindfulness as connotations that, respectively, gain relevance in context.
- 6 This harks back to Mencius' teachings on basic human propensities, the four beginnings (*sidaan* 四端), and inborn knowledge of the good (*liangzhi* 良知) (Lau 1970). These are basic planks in most liberal humanistic outlooks.
- 7 One thinks of Plato's dialogue *Meno* (Guthrie 1956), which shows how faulty knowledge can lead people astray.
- 8 This carries the connotation of one's life mission, particularly in terms of interpersonal responsibilities to family, society, and career.
- 9 Zhu Xi is contrasting empty, wooden truisms with the deeper array of organizing patterns that constitute life and value, and motivate cultivation. Zhu Xi's use of *daoli* here diverges from modern Mandarin, in which questioning whether an idea or proposition has any *daoli* is asking whether it is reasonable, that is to say, reasonably grounded.

make further progress. Consider, rather, Yan Hui's "inability to give up, even if he had wanted to" (*Analects* 9.11; Ames 1998, 128f), and the petty man's "working tirelessly for his own benefit", constantly bearing it in mind (*Mencius* 7A:25; Lau 1970, 187). The cultivation effort of those who lack in resolve will not succeed in the long run. (Zhu 1986, ch. 118)

The resolve that drives one's conduct of inquiry and learning is existential, and will continue to empower one throughout life. Indeed,

In the conduct of all sorts of affairs, one must first establish resolve. One maintains *jing* in the midst of conducting affairs and things... One's resolve, however, transcends the matters at hand; thus, it can't be overwhelmed and shattered into tiny pieces. (Ibid., ch. 118)

Zhu even maintained that the achievements of Confucius, the sage, could be attributed, not just to his gifts, talents, and special destiny, but to the existential resolve of his deepest purpose.

In the world are countless roads and crossings, why didn't the sage take other roads? He only arrived at this particular juncture because his [existential] resolve expressed his deepest purpose. (Ibid., ch. 23)¹⁰

At the same time, Zhu cautioned that one's resolve and dedication should not be translated into an exclusive concern with certain focal texts and topics. While pursuing core projects and concerns, the learner/researcher should stay open, alert, observant, and develop a practical grasp of the things around her, so as to add texture and depth to her knowledge, and thus enhance her versatility in responding to all matters. Such a grasp and versatility distinguish a vital learner from an empty pedant, and make one's life increasingly resonant and fluent.

Generally, in free time one should strive to grasp the things at hand. By developing a practical grasp of things, whenever you encounter new affairs your knowledge will be extended case by case. But, people nowadays feel disinclined to grasp things in their leisure time. When they encounter affairs they balk at investigating their *daoli*¹¹ anew and take

10 Much is made of Confucius' nurturing a hoary tradition, but he learned from many teachers and his greatness lay in continuously reorienting tradition on an ethical foundation of mutual care and responsibility. His example proves Sartre's observation, "There is no traced out path to salvation; one must constantly invent one's own path. But, to invent it, one is free, responsible, without excuse, and every hope lies within him" (Flynn 2014).

11 In this passage, *daoli* pertains to the operative general patterns that shape and guide phenomena and events. The meaning thus differs from its alternative usage discussed in note 9, above.

ease in their own shallowness and vulgarity. Such people don't mature or make much progress; in the end, they have no achievements. The problem is that they lack resolve and waste their lives in vain. (Zhu 1986, ch. 15)

Moreover, establishing resolve does not involve casting off guided programs of learning *per se*. Rather, it empowers one to get more out of such systematic learning while not becoming narrow and enclosed within it as an epistemic cocoon.

Having established resolve, one should still endeavour to learn gradually step-by-step, bearing the general framework of appropriateness and pattern (*yili* 義理)¹² in mind. Thus determined, one who feels trepidation can engage in discussion, nurture the root, practice self-examination, and expect to make some progress. Those who are satisfied to be dabblers need to wake up and redouble their seriousness, *jing*, dedication, and nurturing, lest their progress be intermittent and their efforts wasted for lacking the certitude of clear comprehension and the efficacy of personal experience. (Zhu 2002, ch. 55, letter to Chen Zhaozeng)

Zhu Xi's primary cultivations of abiding in *jing*, nurturing the root, examining the self, and establishing resolve are attitudinal, orientational, and existential. They keep one grounded and centred as one embarks on inquiry and learning, and facilitate one's efforts at knowledge acquisition, self-transformation, and self-realization. When Zhu Xi speaks of staying open to the things going on, it reminds us of the long-term value of acquainting oneself with a variety of fields to establish a well-rounded knowledge of humanity, society, and nature, and have a context for appreciating one's own chosen field.¹³

Even in this brave new world of computerized learning and research and digitized data, advanced students and researchers understand the need to stay committed and motivated to achieve their educational goals. They have demonstrably less cognizance, however, of the need to abide in *jing*, nurture the root, and examine the self. That is, they lose sense of the need to stay alert and be aware of everything one does, to maintain one's basic sense of innocence and humanity, and to reflect on what one is thinking and doing.

12 Appropriateness (*yi* 義) pertains to one's sensitivity and discernment as to what is most fitting in context, all things considered, against the backdrop of immanent patterning (*li* 理), that structure and balance phenomena and events.

13 James Austin underscores the positive role of side interests and knowledge in enhancing one's ability to see connections and creativity (Austin 2003). As Austin shows, Alexander Fleming's side interests, extracurricular knowledge, and quirks were indispensable to his discovery of penicillin.

Computerized learning and digitized data are highly mediated and automated, and stir a sort of distancing from the self and mindlessness that can lead to self as well as other alienation. Moreover, the more one keeps directly interacting with digital machines through keyboards and monitors, the more one's crucial interpersonal intercourse becomes indirect and mediated. In this sort of increasingly impersonal cognitive environment, any notion of nurturing the root would tend to go by the wayside, and self-examination would have more to do with data management skills and control than with examining the probity of one's ethical conduct and conscience.¹⁴ Yet, without doubt, such attitudinal, orientational, and existential cultivations remain necessary to the proper and personally enriching conduct of advanced reading, reflection, and research in the humanities.

Conducting Inquiry to Attain Knowledge

The notion of "attaining knowledge" (*zhizhi* 致知)¹⁵ is central to Zhu Xi's approach to cultivating mind, and he insists that one attains knowledge by actively investigating things. For Zhu, attaining knowledge is tantamount to exploring their constituent patterns and propensities. Zhu's account of knowledge seeks a sort of working "knowing that", getting things right, the value of which lay in the Rylean facet of "knowing how". That is, the getting things right is in order to inform one's responses. Since so much Confucian knowledge has to do with propriety and appropriateness in conduct, the accumulation of such knowledge, be it knowing how or knowing that,¹⁶ lays

14 This does not necessarily mark an East-West difference in approaching humanities research. I would instead put it that traditional, pre-computerized humanities research in the West tacitly involved the assumption of Zhu Xi's attitudinal, orientational, and existential cultivations. By the same token, contemporary students of Zhu Xi will use computers and digital data to access his writings and his ideas. Whereas traditional students had to plod and ponder his texts, turning to printed dictionaries along the way, the new breed roams enhanced texts with built-in dictionaries and explanations that appear at the press of a key. However, with the exponentially expanding use of study aids of all sorts, too many standard answers are given and facile understandings arrived at. The reduced pondering, too, results in less intimacy and resonance with the text, as one's own tacit assumptions and lines of approach remain unchallenged as one heedlessly ploughs ahead.

15 The connotation of "extending knowledge" is often implied.

16 Gilbert Ryle's famous distinction between knowing that and knowing how (Ryle 1949). Knowing that is cognitive and discursive and involves confirming the facts. Knowing how is behavioral and often cannot be put into words. I would put that for Zhu Xi a continuum exists between the knowing obtained by study and knowing how, in that all sorts of "knowing that" inform one's considerations, judgments, even impulses, in taking action. He would agree with biologists that every bit of knowledge feeds into our epistemic maps for navigating and

the ground for attaining performative “tacit knowledge”, *a la* Michael Polanyi (1966, 2002). Zhu remains concerned with accuracy and getting it right; for not only do we depend on such proper understanding to inform our instincts and emotions, and guide our judgments and actions, many moralists make mistaken judgments and make inappropriate responses precisely because they do not know the warp and woof of the world in depth, but only general truisms and customs of the tradition.¹⁷

What then does Zhu mean by “investigating things”? He generally supports Cheng Yi’s account of “investigating things”, which involves striking a balance between subjectivity and objectivity, perspective and detail. Zhu Xi is attentive to striking this sort of balance in his own approach to investigating things to attain knowledge. By developing the notion of pattern as the nexus of order and knowledge, and stressing a commonality of pattern, patterning in the heart-mind and in phenomena and affairs, Zhu epistemically seeks a sort of *inner resonance* in investigating phenomena and affairs. Achieving such an inner resonance is important, since patterns are implicated not just formally and cognitively, but also emotively and interactively, in their instantiations (basic propensities) and settings. The knowledge one attains involves grasping such patterns and propensities in the contexts, or matrices, of their interactive relations, as well as one’s impulses of appropriate response.

To be sure, Zhu Xi broadened Cheng Yi’s account of investigating things and made it more inclusive. In this effort, he gave the first definitive Neo-Confucian account of investigating things in the “Supplement on investigating things” he appended to chapter 5 in the *Advanced Learning* (大學 *Daxue*), which reads:

The expression “attaining knowledge lies in investigating things” means that, if one intends to attain knowledge, it lies in exploring the patterns of the things one encounters. Indeed, there is nothing the discerning human mind cannot comprehend, for there is nothing in the world that doesn’t possess patterns. It is just because there remain some patterns one hasn’t explored that one’s knowledge is not exhaustive. This is why the first step in advanced learning is, regarding everything in the world, for the learner to proceed in each instance on the basis of what he already knows of their patterns, to explore them further in order to understand

responding to events as best we can; for Zhu Xi, it would be “as appropriately we can, and with utmost propriety”.

17 The Buddha was similarly concerned with accurate knowledge to support enlightened awareness and conduct.

them to the utmost. Having exerted oneself at this for a long time, one will suddenly have a penetrating comprehension. One will penetrate the latent and the manifest, the seed and chaff of all things and understand the whole substance and far-reaching function of mind. This is what is called “investigating things”, it is what is called, “the utmost of knowledge”. (Adapted from Chan 1963, 89)

Notably, since the self-same patterns/patterning constitute the heart-mind as form the living world, the investigation of things and affairs discloses not only their patterns of formation and intercourse but *ipso facto* the patterns constituting the heart-mind and its perceptual and responsive operations. For Zhu Xi, object realization as much as other realization is a mirror to reflexive self-realization. At the same time, how can one hope to comprehend “all things in the world”, even in principle? Zhu Xi explains that patterns/patterning are patterned, comprehended, and manifested throughout reality. Since the patterns unfold organically in the flux of phenomena and the formation and development of things, they are all organically related, parallel, symmetrical in form, and can be traced back to their originating form as the single pattern.¹⁸ Hence, every new bit of knowledge one acquires, every new facet of pattern one grasps, casts additional light onto the new phenomena and the constituent patterns that one encounters.

These subtle, fine-mesh *daoli* are utterly inexhaustible. There is no dimension in which they aren't manifested. They penetrate and connect all the myriad complexities. (Zhu 1986, ch. 22)

The manifold complexities ultimately all trace back to the one pattern. (Ibid., ch. 41)

Daoli is distributed amongst all things and affairs. It definitely isn't concentrated in one place. (Ibid., ch. 120)

Such *daoli* penetrate everywhere equally – seed and chaff, small and large – in every direction. Grasp all four sides together in comprehending them. (Ibid., ch. 116)

For Zhu, this extension, unfolding, and dispersal, not to mention folding and return, of patterns throughout the world mean that patterns are at once integrated and also manifested variously in multi-perspectival ways. For this reason, one has to be constantly prepared to adjust one's pre-conceptions and stance to see through the phenomena appropriately, and grasp their

18 The originative single pattern would be supreme polarity (*taiji* 太極), which triggers the *yin-yang* polarity in *qi*.

patterns effectively. Zhu observed this need for multiple perspectives for understanding human affairs, natural phenomena, and even artefacts.¹⁹

The learning of the common person usually deviates toward one set pattern and stresses one position. Therefore, fierce debates break out because people don't see all four sides.²⁰ The sage [Confucius] stayed balanced, upright, in harmony and fair, and thus remained free of deviation or bias. (Zhu 1986, ch. 8)²¹

Although the myriad patterns are ultimately expressions of the single [originative] pattern, learners still must attend to the manifold complexities within the myriad patterns. By drawing together all four sides, they will naturally realize the single pattern. Not attending to those myriad patterns but attending solely to one set pattern is groundless imagining. (Ibid., ch. 117)

Gather examples of all species in order to observe the spirit of transformations in nature. Collect all kinds of construction materials to understand their respective functions in the building of a house. One must release one's mind and spirit in order to pay attention. (Zhu 1986, ch. 117)

What is important is to comprehend inner and outer, root and branch, hidden and manifest, seed and chaff, completely and comprehensively in each respect. (Ibid., ch. 18)

Interestingly, in Zhu Xi's account of patterns/patterning in the "Supplement to Chapter 5" quoted above, he elaborates on patterns/patterning in more or less general and specific, abstract and concrete senses.²² Zhu Xi also stresses time and again that "understanding [a] pattern exhaustively" must be undertaken on the basis of investigating things; he sees no sense in examining the idea of pattern *simpliciter*, in abstraction from phenomena; for the significance of patterns/patterning surely lies in its formative role in processes, cycles, phenomena, and affairs. *Li* must be implicated in phenomena or affairs to be discernible and have epistemic value, practical traction, and ethical significance.

Is any of this instructive for the contemporary computer-assisted conduct of research, reflection, and writing? I would tend to say yes. While we might not

19 See Zhuangzi's similar position in ch. 17, "Autumn Floods" (Watson 1968), and also see Thompson (2015, 150–6).

20 "Four" stands for multiple.

21 A reference perhaps to Confucius' four abstentions (*Analects* 9.4; Ames 1998, 127).

22 This can perhaps be likened to Russell's notion of type levels and Hegel's notion of levels of abstract universals and concrete universals.

subscribe specifically to Zhu Xi's ontology of pattern, or pattern and *qi*, his underlying conception of patterns/patterning, set in real dynamic contexts, remains instructive and provides a handle for understanding and responding to things and affairs.²³ The notion of pattern cuts to the chase of human perception and knowledge, as contemporary neural science tells us that our perceptions are coded on the basis of pattern recognition, which apparently goes much deeper and is more exacting than, say, the venerable Aristotelian categories.²⁴ I would add that whenever we conduct research and reflection, we arrange sets of relevant distinctions and categories for the data for the purpose of that project. We could say that the logic, categories, and structure that we project in our understanding of the data tend to shape both the data sets (the phenomena) we are dealing with and our mindset as we attempt to conceptualize the data and work with them. In that sense, the self-same patterns are at work together both in (our views of) things and affairs and in our minds and conceptualizations, particularly as our understandings get closer to the truth. So, it is important not only to get things right, but also to think about the things in a relevant and effective, systematic order.

Importantly, Zhu Xi at the same time understands that we can and do get things wrong and invariably need to rethink everything when the data, or experiential or experimental results, turn out very differently from our conceptual or hypothetical expectations. Zhu Xi understands the provisional nature of human understandings of the structure and processes of the world; hence, he knows that an accurate account of a pattern with respect to knowledge and, by extension, value, would refer it to the final outcome of ongoing inquiry and reflection, rather than something given as understood at the outset.²⁵ It is important to realize that Zhu Xi's notion of the this same patterns/patterning permeating world and mind is reminiscent of the early Wittgenstein's claim of a common logical space answering to world, language, and thought, by virtue of which language – and knowledge – mirrors reality and allows us to talk about real facts. Zhu's notion of the basic intelligibility of the world by virtue of the patterns which permeate and run through it parallels Wittgenstein's idea that every state of affairs in the world, in principle, can be expressed as a fact in language, and so that my language constitutes my

23 See David Wade, *Li: Dynamic Form in Nature* (2003).

24 Think of the thousands of faces we can distinguish based on raw pattern recognition as compared to the relatively few we could distinguish using Aristotelian categories. Neural research shows our categorical understanding is parasitic on our pattern recognition, without which it could not take place. See Hawkins (2004, 60f).

25 This result is consistent with the "Supplement to Chapter 5" of the *Great Learning* and exemplified in some of Zhu Xi's observations of natural phenomena.

world. Zhu Xi would be committed to the notion that we express our cognizance of patterns/patterning propositionally, and manifest that understanding performatively through speech and action.²⁶

Responsive Chord Within Cognition

A decisive plank in Zhu's "Supplement to Chapter 5" of the *Advanced Learning* is, "On the basis of what one already knows of their patterns, to explore them further". This key insight harks back to the notion of instinctual human responses,²⁷ as well as knowing how and the tacit knowledge one builds up of how things happen in the world.²⁸ Though this might seem to be a departure from foundational, "objective" Western styled research, in the humanities one tends to conduct research on topics that one feels an affinity with and responds to, that strike a chord, that resonate. I would propose that the researcher's resonance with his or her chosen research area contributes to his or her arriving at an approach and basic argument about the data.²⁹ Furthermore, this notion of resonance helps to explain the underlying human reasonableness of giving charitable readings or interpretations. Such readings are not merely charity work conducted out of sympathy, but reflect that the critic's responsiveness to the author's basic feelings and take on the material. Uncharitable readings and interpretations are often false to the extent that they depart from the inclination and spirit of the original and push it in alien directions, which might be formally justified but are just false to the spirit of the material, even to the spirit of the argument. For example, many critical expositions of arguments in Plato are only correct when the arguments have been abstracted from their dialogical contexts and ironed out to fit logical stencils, however they miss subtleties and nuances of the dialogue and its context, and thus turn out to be irrelevant or merely a sidelight to Plato's own intentions and project. For his part, Zhu explains:

One must pay attention on the basis of one's instincts (Zhu 1986, ch. 8).

26 Thus answering to the later as well as early Wittgenstein.

27 This refers to preserving the root and Mencius' four beginnings, etc., mentioned above. See note 6/142.

28 See Zhuangzi's comments on the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of the human, and the knowledge that one knows *vis-à-vis* the knowledge one does not know in the opening paragraphs of *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6, "The Venerable Teacher" (Watson 1968). Wittgenstein offers similar reflections in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1971).

29 This goes on as well in much research that is deemed *prima facie* objective. Even mathematicians and physicists speak of the beauty (aesthetics) of a compelling, well-formed argument or theory.

One must infer from what one knows in order to eventually reach the level of knowing all (ibid., ch. 15).

What learners mean by “investigating things” nowadays lacks initial clues and is merely blindly investigating by inquiring into things. (Zhu 1986, ch. 15)

To date, all verifiable knowledge is human knowledge, and to that extent subject to human sensitivity.

Investigating Things to Extend Knowledge

Zhu's “Supplement to Chapter 5” of the *Advanced Learning* enjoins us to, “Seek to reach its ultimate”. This imperative involves making efforts to attain an understanding of the full range of the implications of a phenomenon, concept, or value. This is not pointing to an essentialist platonic ideal, but rather the full range, the full gamut of what a phenomenon, concept, or value involves. As Zhu Xi explains:

Everyone knows that a son knows to be filial, and a father knows to be affectionate. The problem is that people just don't understand these virtues thoroughly. What's important is to want to understand these virtues in depth. Consider a light shining through a hole. The light grows brighter when the hole is enlarged. All things have their patterns, and people are acquainted with their own [constitutive life] patterns, such as filial piety and affection. But, if one's knowledge is not very penetrating it is as if one remains mostly in the dark. (Ibid.)

Hence, Zhu's imperative “to reach its ultimate”, is intended to encourage people to reach a penetrating comprehension of the concept or matter or value under consideration. If one's penetration is shallow one's comprehension will be weak and unsteady, like the narrow beams of light peeping through tiny holes. While students tend to be uninterested in thinking about basic issues like filiality and eager to consider more exotic, esoteric matters, Zhu Xi considered that people who remain unclear or in the dark about such basics as filiality and filial affection would tend to be fuzzy headed and unable to grasp the deeper things very well. Therefore, he set up genuine or authentic working knowledge as a goal,

“Attaining knowledge” is the means by which one seeks authentic knowledge.

Authentic knowledge involves penetrating things to the marrow to comprehend them thoroughly. (Ibid.)

Knowledge, to be authentic, must penetrate to the marrow. Thus, the Master further said, “Investigating things is just attending to phenomena, while the knowledge attained is this mind’s penetrating comprehension.” (Ibid.)

Cutting through the metaphors, we may consider Zhu Xi’s notion of penetrating knowledge as in-depth knowledge that is at once detailed and comprehensive. For Zhu Xi, this would involve sensitivity to fine details, distinctions, and differences. He stressed the importance of achieving penetrating, in-depth knowledge, sensitive to fine distinctions, because he saw that many people judge things crudely and act on vague, general concepts, and thus while they might make judgments and perform actions that are *prima facie* in accord with custom and virtue, on a closer look they actually violate or contradict the values of propriety and humaneness.³⁰ In the case of values, in particular, one arrives at a penetrating comprehension by drawing inferences in a variety of cases cued by one’s basic impulses in response to what one intuitively knows within.

Consider King Xuan’s seeing an ox and feeling that he couldn’t bear the suffering of others [Mencius 1A:6]. To extend this feeling such that all things are covered by its empathetic concern is precisely what is meant by “investigating” and “attaining”. This is to investigate, infer, explore, and attain to the utmost. Each person has his own store of knowledge and experience to draw on; nobody can be called completely ignorant – even the infant knows to love its parents and, as it grows up, to respect its elder brothers and so forth, down to knowing the basic distinctions between good and bad and right and wrong, which one then discerns clearly. But, as to one who doesn’t go on to infer, extend, and expand on such feelings, experiences, and knowledge, one’s experience and knowledge will, ultimately, remain like this. [...What is important is to explore and investigate on the basis of the clues of one’s initial feelings]. (Ibid.)

This passage goes beyond one’s usual study and inquiry to consider the in-born moral sensitivities that begin to inform the researcher and develop in her thinking in the course of conducting humanities research. I stress moral sensitivities as opposed to strict virtues or principles, because this involves filling out and refining one’s basic responsive life knowledge with the deeper lessons and insights that take place as one undertakes research and reflection in the humanities. We might say that Zhu Xi stresses the importance of

30 For this reason, Zhu Xi, following Mencius, spoke of the need to overturn ritual to fulfill humaneness in cases in which a standard observance of the ritual would cause harm or suffering.

sensitivity and empathetic inquiry, and the bottom line is that one put one-self fully into it.

In investigating things, what is important is to pay close attention *through the self*. (Zhu 1986, ch. 15; italics added)

To just explore the patterns of the myriad things in the world broadly, without endeavouring to grasp them *through the self*, is what is described by... [the Cheng Masters] as “galloping off with no point of return”. (Ibid., ch. 18; italics added)

Putting one's heart into it is clearly a departure from the disinterested objectivism that is encouraged by so-called advanced, computer-driven research in today's digital data. However, as Zhu Xi would remind us, the very nature of humanities materials calls for sensitivity and empathetic reading and inquiry. The humanities researcher who does not read, reflect, and respond in a responsive, humane way will not be up to the task.

Putting one's heart into it turns out to be epistemologically justified for Zhu Xi, in that his notion of heart-mind is emotionally (and responsively) as well as cognitively (and rationally) *wired into* the living world of *qi* and patterns/patterning such that,

...there is nothing the discerning human mind cannot comprehend, for there is nothing in the world that doesn't possess patterns. It is just because there remain some patterns one hasn't explored that one's knowledge is not exhaustive. This is why..., regarding everything in the world,... the learner proceeds in each instance on the basis of what he or she already knows of their patterns, to explore them further in order to understand them to the utmost. (*Daxue zhangju*, ch. 5)

Not only is putting one's heart into it epistemologically justified for Zhu Xi; since the same pattern/patterning constitute the heart-mind and knowledge as the world, phenomena, and affairs, one's exhaustive knowledge of the world is tantamount to exhaustive knowledge of the heart-mind and self, not to mention humanity.

Since the heart-mind is limitless, how could it be exhausted? Since things are countless, how could they be exhausted? But, one who reaches the level of penetrating realization and really grasps it will understand it all. This is to be exhaustive. (Zhu 1986, ch. 60)

One can't exhaust the function of heart-mind; what can be exhausted are just the patterns/patterning of the heart-mind. (Ibid.)

Ultimately, we, “Investigate things in order to illuminate this very heart-mind”. (Ibid., ch. 118)

“Illuminate this mind” refers to the inner realization that one has arrived at penetrating knowledge, authentic knowledge, which gets into the marrow. This is the sort of knowledge one acquires by investigating things to explore patterns/patterning. One who has explored the patterns of numerous phenomena, and reached the level of a sudden penetrating realization, in effect, has fully grasped the patterns/patterning of the heart-mind; thereafter, one is equipped to see through the myriads sorts of matters that arise. For Zhu Xi, one who is armed with this sort of penetrating realization is equipped to grasp quite readily any new things as they arise.

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Nobody conducting inquiry and research in the humanities, or even the human sciences, would today make such sweeping claims for the general applicability of their epistemico-ontological assumptions, such as Zhu Xi’s basic ideas of patterns/patterning, *qi*, basic propensities, and heart-mind. However, these assumptions do not make Zhu’s ideas or system rigid or limited. They stir the imagination, and provide useful ways to look at the facts and assess our feelings. One must keep in mind at the same time that Zhu Xi’s ideas of patterns/patterning and *daoli* do not form a linear, logocentric system, but rather are multivalent, holistic, and regarded as organically unfolding as well as re-enfolding. As noted above, this extending and dispersal, as well as folding and return, of patterns/patterning throughout this flowing world mean that patterns/patterning are regarded as at once integrated and also manifested variously in multi-perspectival ways, such that one has to constantly adjust one’s ideas and stance to grasp the phenomena and their basic propensities and guiding patterns sensitively and appropriately. Zhu Xi thus observed the need for multiple perspectives for understanding human affairs, natural phenomena, and even artefacts.³¹

Although the myriad patterns ultimately are expressions of the single [originative] pattern, learners still must attend to the manifold complexities within the myriad patterns. By drawing together all four sides, they will naturally realize the single [originative] pattern. Not attending to those myriad patterns but attending solely to the single originative pattern is groundless imagining. (Zhu 1986, ch. 117)

The learning of the common person usually deviates toward one set pattern and stresses one position. Therefore, fierce debates break out because people don’t see all four sides. The sage [Confucius] stayed

31 See Zhuangzi’s similar position in ch. 17, “Autumn Floods” (Watson 1968).

balanced, upright, in harmony and fair, and thus remained free of deviation or bias. (Ibid., ch. 8)

The argument might be made that Zhu Xi's system and approach allow for multiple perspectives and understandings, for multivalency and different reads of the basic propensities and patterns, because they are more about life *praxis* than theoretical understanding, which is the typical goal of advanced inquiry at present. They are not about reaching the sort of definitive explanation and understanding that are the earmarks of traditional Western philosophy and contemporary advanced research, in the humanities as in other fields. For the moment, I would propose that Zhu Xi's system and approach are aimed at precisely the sort of subjective comprehension (objectively validated, nonetheless) that lends itself to enhanced self-realization and self-conscious personhood and practice that remain the everlasting, though increasingly tacit, goal of work in the humanities, whether creative or academic.

Zhu Xi on the Conduct of Learning and Reading

Again, for Zhu Xi, learning and reading are part of one's self-cultivation efforts and goal, essentially to become a sensitive, responsible, and self-conscious person, dedicated to humane values and living. The value to be derived from mastering the subtleties of the texts lay in the basic truths of life they convey, their ethical import. Zhu Xi was critical of those students of ancient texts who seek esoterica and "enjoy mysteries and subtleties. They even probingly speak of the imageless and formless (which are unspeakable)" (ibid., ch. 26).

By contrast,

The sage (Confucius) expressed himself plainly and uprightly. But, people nowadays insist on seeking marvels and expounding on the lofty and far-reaching. When interpreting texts, they insist on explaining even the obviously shallow commonplace passages in profound phrases. Concerning the outer, they insist on discussing the inner. (Ibid.)

Above, we saw that Zhu Xi's approach to inquiry was bound up with the core cultivation efforts of abiding in *jing*, nurturing the root, and examining self. One's serious learning and reading, especially of the classics, should involve the project of establishing one's great root, in effect, grounding and centering oneself in those patterns, principles, values, and way of life. As Zhu elaborates,

In the conduct of learning, one first must establish the great root. In the beginning, one is quite narrow. In the middle phase of learning, one expands and broadens while at the end one again narrows down. Recently learners have liked to pursue the narrow, but without seeking to go on to broaden themselves; how are they then to confirm their narrow understanding? There are also those who seek only to broaden themselves without returning back to the narrow. Their ailment is even worse than that of being too narrow and lacking in breadth. (Zhu 1986, ch. 11)

Zhu regarded the middle stage of learning, the effort of broadening oneself, as the most crucial and painstaking part of learning. This is where one learns about the differences and fine distinctions that make one more discerning and one's responses more appropriate. The narrow "great root" is orientational and pertains to the laying and setting of one's foundation. The process back from breadth to narrowness refers to one's integrating and synthesizing one's wide learning, making it viable for refining one's judgments and actions, making them acute and propitious; this process would be a major step in fulfilling one's existential resolve to be a sensitive, responsible, self-conscious person.

Reading, for Zhu Xi, is an inherent part of the other cultivation efforts, linked to the broader conduct of inquiry, culminating in investigating things to understand their patterns exhaustively. It is a little-known fact that Zhu was the only prominent Neo-Confucian master to register the central role of reading, and to discuss it extensively. His account of reading with regard to interpreting and understanding classical texts is particularly relevant to discussions on the study of humanities texts today. Importantly, he teaches keeping an open mind about a text, being wary of forcing one's preconceptions and personal views on it, and the importance of reading a text over and over again, and immersing and steeping oneself in it. For example, Zhu Xi writes,

In reading, one mustn't foist one's personal views onto the text. Look at it according to the actual meaning of the words; distinguish the meaning of the text clearly on the basis of the words. Review it tirelessly in this way for long days and deep months. (Ibid.)

If you read with preconceptions, since they aren't necessarily correct you shouldn't stubbornly stick to them. Just set them aside and read the text over again in order to arrive at a fresh view. (Ibid.)

It's like draining muddy water, after which the clear water appears. (Ibid.)

For Zhu Xi, besides staying open-minded and free of pre-conceptions, the reader must stay concentrated and focus on the text at hand.

Review and reread the passages one comprehends. (Zhu 1986, ch. 10)

Just read according to the sequence of the text; each guiding pattern then will appear naturally in context. In this way after a long time, one will experience an overall grasp. (Ibid., ch. 11)

One needs this sort of solid mastery of a text for dealing with the problems of interpretation that arise. Moreover, such problems and doubts are inevitable for a serious reader who questions consistency and implications, as well as basic meanings. For example,

The points at which the explanations of various masters differ or agree are worthy of note. Supposing *A* explains it in one way, just grasp *A*'s position and examine his account thoroughly; then, suppose *B* explains it in another way, just grasp *B*'s position and examine his account thoroughly. Having explored these two masters' positions completely, proceed to investigate the text further and consider the matter exhaustively. Certainly one of the accounts will turn out to be correct. (Ibid.)³²

Encountering doubts and problems are the bread and butter of serious reading, which make it an intriguing exercise, and an utterly unproblematic philosophy text would seem facile and vapid.

Read up to the point at which numerous doubts arise, such that you neglect to sleep and eat. In this way, you can make rapid progress.... It is like deploying troops: you have to score a major kill to be deemed adept at gaining victory. (Zhu 1986, ch. 10)

Although one shouldn't concoct groundless explanations, when doubts arise in reading one will form opinions of one's own. At such times, one can't help but form an explanation. Those who haven't formed an explanation simply haven't encountered any doubtful places in their reading. (Zhu 1986, ch. 11)

Such valid doubts reflect the seriousness with which one reads. At the same time, the reader's doubts must be well founded and not made up and arbitrary. One who commences reading a text with doubts, in current jargon simply problematizing for the sake of problematizing, is not going to grasp anything or make serious headway in reading. Indeed, feeling and expressing

32 There is no reason there might not be more than two possible interpretations or readings of a text.

doubt with a true point and purpose depend on a basic initial mastery of the overall text.

Otherwise, one won't be equipped to extend doubt meaningfully, not to mention to explain the problem.

Ultimately, such valid exercises of doubt involve bringing one's cultivated knowledge, values, logic, and powers of judgment into play. One's development as a resourceful, passionate thinker proceeds as much through such exercises of doubt as by reading the noble thoughts of the sages.

During their famous symposium at Goose Lake, Zhu Xi wrote the following poem in response to the poems by Lu Xiangshan and his brothers, which celebrated insight learning:

Discuss past learning to increase your subtlety;

Nurture new understandings to increase your depth.

For Zhu, the first line expresses a requirement for carrying out the second. It is best for the intellectual and moral vanguard to nurture their new understandings in the light of the long experience and lasting truths of earlier generations. This is true whether one is basically accepting or rejecting the truths of the past; otherwise, each successive generation will find itself in the position of reinventing the wheel.

Zhu Xi's discussions on reading become more pointed and begin to approximate modern hermeneutics when he considers reading the ancient classics, yet he also finds much to criticize in the predilections of classical commentators of his day. The *Book of Changes* remains among the most challenging of the classics. As Zhu notes, understanding this text is not simply a matter of understanding the words on the page and the underlying principles; it is a matter of grasping patterns of change and transformation in nature and human life.

The *Book of Changes* contains detailed information about material facts and covers human affairs thoroughly. All the matters mentioned really occurred. Learners today just review and recite every day beneath their lamp or window without personally having responded or adapted to changes in the world. Suddenly given this book to read, they are ill-prepared to grasp it. (Zhu 1986, ch.11)

The *Book of Change* describes the patterns/patterning of things and affairs according to transformations of yin and yang. Great and small, seed and chaff, the *Book of Changes* covers them all. In particular, one can't

read it with a biased mind, stressing the inner but neglecting the outer, bored of action and craving ease and tranquillity. (Zhu 2002, ch. 43, letter to Li Kelian)

Clearly, for Zhu, it is useless to study the *Book of Changes* in a scholastic way, quietly under a lamp or window. Zhu understands the limits of bookish learning and becoming a well-versed reader without knowing how things actually transpire in the world, and so places equal emphasis on practical experience.

Moreover, Zhu understands that not all canonical texts are equal and present the same sorts of problems to the reader and interpreter. For instance,

Naturally, some books are suitable for anyone to read, such as the *Advanced Learning*, *Analects*, *Mencius* and *Zhongyong*. Indeed, how could one simply not read them? By reading these four books, one grasps the indispensable *daoli* of daily life, as well as the proper sequence of learning. Afterwards, one can go on to read the *Odes*, *Documents*, *Rites*, and *Music*. Although I heard others claim they'd read the *Book of Changes*, I took them to be mistaken because they hadn't observed the proper sequence of learning. The *Book of Changes* doesn't directly present these *daoli* and is by no means a common textbook. (Zhu 1986, ch. 67)

Indeed, recognizing that the *Book of Changes* was originally a divination manual, Zhu first studied the images and the calculations (*xiangshu* 象數) in the work, treating them as more important than the didactic significance attributed to the text by Cheng Yi. He explains, "...the *Book of Changes* is especially difficult. Before opening the scripts, one must have made a serious effort to master the images and calculations" (Zhu 2002, ch. 35, letter to Chen Mingzhong).

Since the *Book of Odes* is a literary text, Zhu Xi's account of his efforts to interpret it is also relevant:

When I interpreted the *Odes*, I'd just read the original text 40 or 50 times and gain a 60 to 70% comprehension. Then, I'd see how my impressions jibed with the various commentaries. After I'd gained a general grasp of an ode in this way, I'd reread it 30 or 40 more times and become conversant with its main idea, and get it for myself. (Zhu 1986, ch. 80)

Zhu's tended to study individual odes in the *Book of Odes* in three stages. He'd first recite the ode many times. After attaining a basic mastery of the ode, he would consult the commentaries, which was the second stage. He tended to draw on all of the commentaries, old and new. Having mastered these interpretations, he would reread the ode thirty or forty times more;

the third stage. At this point, he usually felt adequately conversant with the *daoli* of the ode, that he'd "got it for himself". Zhu approached the other classics in much the same way he approached the *Odes*. Consequently, his learning drew upon the traditional readings and was solidly based on original texts. Yet he also ventured to come up with innovative readings of his own.

What's important in becoming well versed in an ode is to immerse oneself completely in reading it a hundred times through. In that way, the exquisite parts will come out and its subtleties and peculiarities will appear. In reading this one ode, you should spare no effort in reading it over and over until you've thoroughly mastered it. Read it like there is no second ode; that would be the best. But, if you just read this first ode and then go on to the second one, you will never succeed in reading it with comprehension. This would be to be lacking in concentration. It is important to slay your "mindset to wander off and pursue other things", so you can just settle down to read. (Zhu 1986, ch. 80)

As a methodical reader, Zhu understands that the *Odes* has its own inner structure, as does the *Book of Changes*. In approaching each classic one should first inquire into its inner structure. Consequently, to read the *Odes* and the *Book of Changes* simply according to one's initial subjective impressions would not be a valid application of "investigating things to understand pattern exhaustively". Moreover, in reading the *Odes* Zhu understands that their literary merits transcend the didactic intent of most Confucian interpreters.

In reading the *Odes*, besides their didactic significance, it's even better to appreciate their literary composition. (Ibid.)

An ancient said one may be inspired by reading the *Odes* (*Analects* 8/8); what's important is that in reading the *Odes* one feels inspired at certain points. That is to read the *Odes*. (Ibid.)

The *Odes* contain moving sentiments. One who reads them without being moved simply is one whose sensibility was slain by the various Confucian commentators. (Ibid.)

Completely wash away the old interpretations and the sense of the *Odes* will come to life. (Ibid.)

Zhu Xi's approach to these two classics reveals that his commitment to truth goes well beyond the ideology and didacticism of the Confucian tradition, and that he is keenly interested in the actual patterns, principles, and propensities operative in the world and the deeper sentiments of human life,

as expressed through poetry and song. Naturally, the books of Confucius, Zisi, and Mencius express valid patterns, principles, and ideals that Zhu Xi embraces and identifies as his own, yet at the same time he examines and comments on these texts with the same keen critical eye. We thus see Zhu registering several levels and valences of truth corresponding to the course of nature and human life, the deeper sentiments of humanity, and Way and teachings of Confucius and the sage kings and formative Confucian masters.

Concerning Zhu Xi's quest for truth in these ways, Peng Guosheng usefully compares his approach to reading and interpreting the Confucian classics with Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. While Zhu Xi engages in what may be termed Gadamerian baseline textual interpretation to elicit the original meaning(s) of the extant text, and second order textual reconstruction to clarify and elaborate the guiding principles at work it, particularly with respect to the *Four Books*, and with an eye to praxis, Zhu exhibits a sort of exuberance in his readings and commentaries that is not evident in drier Gadamerian approaches (Peng 2015, 326). Peng accounts for Zhu's exuberance in his reading and interpreting as due to his not just participating in, but devotedly cultivating himself, in "sacred" Confucian traditions.

In my view, Zhu Xi's exuberance about not just learning and reading but inquiry in general traces back to his inveterate hunger to probe to the marrow, and understand deeply and practically the world and human existence. His existential resolve to realize himself as a sensitive, responsible, self-conscious person is not just to fulfil the Confucian ideal, but more broadly to be conversant with the flux of reality in nature as well as himself. Certainly, he would advise today's advanced humanities researchers and writers not only to delve whole-heartedly into their focal concerns, but also have a healthy interest in a broad array of matters and phenomena.

Zhu Xi on Extracurricular Learning

Zhu Xi was rather unique in the Confucian tradition for seeking a firm grasp of the patterns of change and transformation that constitute the world and human life.³³ Most of his Neo-Confucian brethren devoted themselves more narrowly to what they considered orthodox learning, and often sought to

33 It might be contested that this impulse underlay the production and use of the *Book of Changes*, and that Shao Yong anticipated Zhu Xi with the notion of observation. I would reply that among Confucian scholars Zhu Xi did the most to think about and develop a method of investigating things to extend knowledge. He developed this notion in greater depth and applied it more widely than had Shao Yong or any other Confucian in traditional China.

purge “extracurricular materials”. Some regarded even literary and historical inquiries as borderline extracurricular, creating for themselves the appearance of empty moralizers and lifeless pedants. By contrast, Zhu Xi sought to understand the dynamics and depths of life and conducted his own learning in a broad and encompassing way. To his Neo-Confucian peers, he would ask, “How can one claim to grasp and carry out the Way if one doesn’t have a handle on the ways of the world and society in which one lives, if one doesn’t register the pulse of everyday life?” As emphasized by Qian Mu, the scope of Zhu’s “investigating things to understand pattern exhaustively” was potentially all-embracing, and so his pursuit of learning extended into what other Confucians would regard as borderline areas and beyond. Two extracurricular realms of particular interest to Zhu Xi were roaming freely in the arts and investigating natural knowledge (Qian 1991, 215).³⁴

Confucius advised his students to roam freely in the arts in their free time. Zhu Xi saw value in such roaming, in that it encourages one to notice the little things, the details, the finer things at hand in daily life, and that it allows one to continue cultivating oneself whether in action or repose. In this way, every moment becomes a precious occasion to be unlocked and appreciated. Indeed, Zhu considered that learners who thus stay in the moment during downtime as well as up-time would tend to have a firmer sense of priorities, and be prone to nurture root and branch, inner and outer together.

For his part, Zhu Xi took joy in painting and drawing, and did some self-portraits. He also enjoyed the lute and was versed in harmony and melodies. When a master of the lute, Cai Yuanding (Jitong, 1135–1198), came to study with him, Zhu received him as an old friend and later discussed the instrument in a letter to the master that linked the principles of the lute with the appropriateness and patterns of the myriad things:

Generally speaking, as to the myriad affairs in the world, their appropriateness and patterns are inexhaustibly subtle; it isn’t easy to determine them thoroughly in a word. One must peer through them as through a crystal screen such that they do not obstruct one another; that is a confirmation of investigating things. (Zhu 2002, ch. 44, letter to Cai Jitong)

Zhu also studied the major works on health, medicine, and the principles of nourishing life, and discussed them knowledgeably. He even investigated the art of quiet-sitting to nourish life, and discussed this with Cai Yuanting in connection with the Daoist text *Can-tong-qi* 參通契 (*The Three Ways Unified and Harmonized*). When Cai was about to go into exile, Zhu discussed the

34 The following examples were drawn from Qian (1991, ch. 30).

Can-tong-qi with gusto when seeing him off. Incredibly, Zhu later wrote a commentary on this text under the pen name Kongtong daoshi Zou Xin 空同道士鄒訢 (Daoist master of vacuity and identity Zou Xin). Some later scholars ridiculed him for writing this commentary; however, they hadn't grasped that Zhu's version of Neo-Confucianism was all embracing, and thus included these other dimensions.³⁵

As noted above, Zhu's method of investigating things was applicable in principle to everything from the cosmos and heavens above, to humanity and the myriad creatures below. Moreover, Zhu's entire effort manifested and authenticated his resolve to attain and extend knowledge by "investigating things to understand patterns exhaustively". It must be noted that while Zhu's teaching of "investigating things" was more about culture and ethics than scientific matters, he did make some salient scientific or proto-scientific observations at a time when few Chinese intellectuals concerned themselves with such things, and officialdom did not hold technologists or engineers in very high regard (Kim 2000). Zhu Xi made numerous observations of natural phenomena couched in (and to a certain extent rationalized) in his *li-qi* conceptual framework. He always sought the underlying patterns and *qi* permutations of the natural phenomena he observed – as well as of the human conduct and texts he investigated. The following are several examples of Zhu Xi's observations of and reflections on natural phenomena.

At several times, Zhu Xi observed fossil shells on mountaintops, and with some amazement inferred a notion of geological evolution in light of received principles of transformation. He writes, for example,

I often see the snail and clam shells atop high mountains, or embedded inside stones: these stones are made of the soil of an earlier time. But, snails and clams live in the water. Thus, the low transforms into the high, the soft transforms into the hard. These matters, if one thinks deeply about them, involve facts that can be confirmed. (Zhu 1986, ch. 94)

Now there are often various types of oyster shells embedded in stones atop high mountains. Oysters must certainly live in the mud but, there they are, in stone. Heaven and earth are changing and rotating; how can anything remain constant? At the time when the mountains, rivers and the great Earth were first produced, their settings must have been quite soft. (Zhu 1985, ch. 1)

35 This text could be regarded as an extension or application of Zhou Dunyi's *Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity*, the cornerstone of Zhu Xi's system of thought.

Moreover, while Zhu held that the earth was stationary *vis-à-vis* the rotating heavens above, later when he considered that the earth lies nested below or within the heavens, he raised the question that while

Heaven rotates on the outside, isn't the earth revolving along with it? Sitting here now, we don't feel that the earth is moving, but how do we know that while heaven rotates on the outside the earth isn't revolving along with it? (Zhu 1985, ch. 86)³⁶

Zhu Xi also offered a probing reflection on the formation of the cosmos. Reminiscent of Spinoza's notion of immanent reason and Wittgenstein's logical space, he regarded patterns/patterning as penetrating everything and not conditioned or limited by extension, dimension, or direction. By the same token, he understood that almanac makers only catch certain discernible annual cycles and seasonal patterns in the world; they cannot register anything deeper or get into the hows or whys these phenomena.

Someone said, "Shao Yong spoke of that which 'lies beyond the six directions.' I fear there is nothing beyond them." The Master replied, "Assuredly, pattern is free of inner and outer. The pattern of the six directions certainly has inner and outer. When almanac makers calculate the *qi*, they just calculate the revolutions of the sun, moon, and stars. Beyond this, they cannot calculate. And, how could these matters be free of inner and outer?" (Zhu 1986, ch. 1)

As to comprehending heaven, the cosmos, and its revolutions more generally, Zhu speaks exuberantly of expanding one's mind and feelings, one's consciousness; by extending from all that one feels, sees, knows, and can imagine, one can begin to get a sense of its immensity. This appears to be an application of Zhu Xi's method of "investigating things to attain knowledge" to nature *writ large*:

Heaven is just a vast entity; one must enlarge one's mind and feelings to begin to gaze upon it. As to the revolution of heaven, in one day it definitely revolves in one cycle. But, there are also major revolution cycles; one cannot approach this matter from just one perspective. (Zhu 1985, ch. 1)

It is fascinating to consider the sorts of existential reflection that would accompany such reflective observations of nature itself.

Interestingly, besides making such discerning scientific remarks, Zhu Xi sometimes also came up with what might be deemed a scientific or proto-scientific

36 This is the sort of question that Copernicus, Kepler, and Columbus were asking themselves.

model or thought experiment to facilitate understanding of natural phenomena. In one such case, Zhu uses a steaming rice pot as a model for understanding precipitation:

When *qi* vaporizes and produces rain, it is just like when the rice pot is covered: the *qi* pressurizes, condenses, and produces droplets. When *qi* vaporizes and produces fog, it is just like when the rice pot isn't covered: the *qi* disperses and is not recovered. (Zhu 1985, ch. 111)³⁷

Zhu Xi was at once rational and empirical in spirit. He observed events carefully with a keen eye and yet sought underlying patterns and offered reasoned speculations on the workings of natural phenomena. He found such inquiries into natural truths invigorating, almost empowering, touching reality in ways that cultural, textual truths never could. Zhu was deeply interested in the patterns constituting, connecting, and guiding physical phenomena; and he investigated natural phenomena in the spirit of roaming freely in the arts, that is, he didn't neglect to observe even the most trifling matters. And, as in his conduct of textual studies and formation of cultivation approaches, he strove to confirm his ideas and hypotheses against the evidence or the touchstone of effectiveness, often in dynamic terms, more in the sense of asking whether that was "how something worked" *in situ*, rather than whether "it was simply true or false". In any case, he wouldn't accept claims or ideas without some indication of their truth, their practical veracity. For example:

A while back, there was a monk who claimed, "In the growth of bamboo sprouts one can observe the 'night vapor'. So, I stuck a pole into the ground to record the growth of a bamboo sprout. From morning until night it grew less than one inch. When I observed it at dawn the next day, it had already grown by several inches." Afterwards, I tested the story at the Jade Mountain Monastery, and found that the bamboo sprouts grew the same amount by day or night. Their actual growth differed entirely from that claim of the monk. (Zhu 1986, ch. 138)

Qian Mu notes that this story presents an interesting contrast to Wang Shouren's anecdote about investigating the bamboo in front of his hall. While the young Wang just sat there and stared blankly at bamboo sprouts expecting their patterning to be manifested before his eyes, and gained no knowledge from the exercise, Zhu's teaching and practice of "investigating

37 It is a shame that nobody realized that the pressurized steam in a vessel could produce power. Laozi planted the seed for this discovery in *Laozi*, ch. 11. But the suggestion was never noticed. See Ames and Hall (2003, 91f).

things” involved observing with a clear question in mind, to be tested and confirmed. Thus, after hearing the monk’s claim about the growth of the plants, Zhu proceeded to measure the actual growth of the bamboo sprouts by day and night when he had some free time (Qian 1991, 219).

Above, we observed that Zhu Xi would have questioned the narrowness and over-professionalization of current humanities research and writing at the college level. In this age of accelerated advanced degree programs, scholars are no longer limited just to the boundaries of their disciplines, but now to their chosen areas and fields within their disciplines.³⁸ This trend not only erodes the scholars’ awareness of the intellectual-historical context of their chosen academic niches, but also alienates them from the constellations of other disciplines surrounding their own. Zhu Xi realized that his own focal concerns, such as the Confucian Way, self-cultivation, and so on, could only be understood, attested, and made more meaningful within larger contexts of knowledge and awareness. His central preoccupations could only come alive when related to a working sense of the world, history, his tradition, other traditions, human nature, and the like. Consequently, his example demonstrates that humanities students and researchers should acquaint themselves broadly within their own field, as well as with smatterings of other fields, in order to add depth and reality to their thought and research. In my case, my earlier efforts to study some science and the philosophy of science were repaid not only in a firmer grasp of recent developments in this area, but also in the writing of a crucial book review (Thompson 2002) and academic presentation (Thompson 2016). These studies also facilitated my recent work in agricultural and sustainability ethics, which has reinvigorated my academic and professional life.³⁹

Calls to expand the purview of one’s interests and learning – so as to include not only attending to and grasping the flow of events going on, whether at hand or in the press, but also making oneself aware of and conversant in ever wider swaths of one’s own discipline, as well as trends of others – perhaps sound like a siren’s call, an impossible dream, in this age of information overload. At present, our focal studies and research efforts are already vastly overwhelmed by the wealth of information at our grasp with the aid of digitization, computers, and the internet. We used to despair at reams of information, now new information pours in by the gigabyte and megabyte!

38 I once heard an American Chinese historian say that he was only knowledgeable about the last fifty years of the Tang dynasty and not to ask him about the early Tang or any other period of Chinese history. Hopefully, he was exaggerating.

39 See also Thompson (2012a, 2012b, and 2013).

How can we be expected to cast our vision beyond this focal amplitude, this infinite depth, which we can barely begin to get a grip on? In this time and age, such calls, as implied in Zhu Xi's teaching and practice, seem delusional if not downright sadistic. However, I maintain that this call is crucial if contemporary humanities researchers and writers are to restore a sense of not only their intellectual balance and equilibrium, but also of their academic commitments and life direction. It is crucial, indeed, to keeping one's academic work and career relevant to life as well as in harness with one's primary resolve to be a sensitive, responsible, self-conscious human being.

Now to the question, how is the contemporary humanities researcher to do this? That is, how is she to keep abreast developments in her own area, not to mention her field at large, while keeping aware of the events going on in other fields of knowledge? After all, there are only 24 hours in a day, and seven days in a week! Well, to this end, the internet may be of service. One may subscribe to several news and academic sites to receive periodic newsletters. One may choose news sites that reflect one's outlook and politics, although it would be healthier to also receive postings of contrary views. Among academic sites, one may choose some that directly reflect one's interests, although again it would also be good to receive newsletters with a more general interest in the field, as well as science reports, such as from the *New Scientist* or *Science Newsletter*. One might visit the new books shelf and the current periodicals room at a university library, say, twice per month, to browse everything. It would also be intellectually expansive to read books from other fields at least once or twice a year, not just for expanding one's intellectual breadth, but for challenging oneself to explore outside one's intellectual comfort zone.

Conclusion

Zhu Xi's views and teachings on inquiry, learning, and reading, as understood in the context of his approach to self-cultivation, are highly relevant for rethinking and addressing the state of advanced education, study, research, reflection, and writing in the contemporary academy, especially in the humanities. While the tools of digitization, computers, and the internet grant us access to unimaginable riches of information, and empower us to explore and crunch that data, they and their applications in MOOCs, distance learning, and video classrooms are ultimately dehumanizing in various ways, and detract from the animating spirit of humanities studies. Consequently, we in this day and age are rapidly losing touch with some of the core elements of humanities education and learning. These

elements are closely connected with the human touch, the personal touch, and are directly involved with the reasons why one enters the humanities in the first place. They have to do with the human spirit, with questions of the meaning and purpose of human life, with the reasons why we all find the courage and conviction to get up in the morning to face yet another day – or not. So much of the true and significant humanities work depends on personal immersion in the focal materials, struggling with them, trying to read the author behind the writings, attempting to make personal sense of his or her productions, efforts that easily become vapid on computer monitors when one is easily distracted by other things online. So much of humanities training and interning involves teachers and students, or just the latter, intensively reading and discussing core texts together, trying to make general sense of these texts together while seeking personal meaning for oneself or one's set. Such activities and quests animated several advanced courses I took in philosophy and literature as a university student, for example on Plato, Melville, Thoreau, the Romantics, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and others, and as a graduate student, such as on Laozi, Zhuangzi, Seng Zhao, the Neo-Confucians, and so forth.⁴⁰ These sorts of activities can be mimicked in online chatrooms, but those dialogues never carry the same feeling or punch as face-to-face conversations.

This sort of humanities spirit and practice underlay Zhu Xi's experience, commitment, practice and teaching, which makes his ideas continue to be relevant and suggestive even today, when this personal and face-to-face sort of learning and study are being supplanted by digital and online tools and apps. Fundamentally, Zhu Xi reminds us that the value of the humanities, and of advanced work in this field in particular, lies precisely in one's establishing the *existential resolve* to see the project through, not merely as an intellectual task to be completed, but even more as part of the *existential humanizing project of cultivating oneself into a more sensitive, reflective, responsible, self-conscious human being*.

In closing, what Kleinbaum wrote of poetry could certainly be said broadly of the humanities, and Zhu Xi would concur:

...We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering... are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love... These are what we stay alive for. (Kleinbaum 1989)⁴¹

40 These readings and activities made these courses absolutely crucial in my personal development as a sensitive, responsible human being, as well as a humanities scholar.

41 A theory-obsessed colleague working in the field of literature called *The Dead Poets Society* a nice, sentimental story. I replied that this story gets at why we as human beings produce, enjoy and study poetry, and literature generally, in the first place. Theory often loses sight of

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Jana S. ROŠKER

Between Tradition and Modernity: Modern Confucianism as a Form of East Asian Social Knowledge

Abstract

In the last decades of the 20th century, the revival of traditional Confucianism assumed increasing importance and relevance. The revitalization of its complex philosophical heritage thus became part of the most important theoretical currents in contemporary East Asian societies. Due to its potentially stabilizing social function and compatibility with capitalism, Confucianism is often seen as the Asian equivalent of Max Weber's "Protestant ethic". In modern Sinology, this view is known as the "post-Confucian hypothesis". The appearance of the "vacuum of values" in modern China and its problematization and connection to the transformation of the structure, role, and function of social knowledge provide a good example of the consequences of explosive social transformation. This also raises the question of whether the Confucian modernization model is indeed capable of generating a non-individualistic version of modernity. Proceeding from this hypothesis, the present paper aims to show that the purported relation between modernity and individualism, which international modernization theories have always viewed as "inevitable" or "intrinsic", is, in fact, little more than an outcome of Western historical paradigms.

Keywords: Confucianism, Modern Confucianism, cultural heritage, East Asian modernization, social knowledge

Introduction – Social Knowledge and the Confucian Revival in East Asia

Proceeding from the notion of Confucianism as a form of social knowledge in East Asia, and speaking about its impact upon the specific features of East Asian modernization, we first have to clarify the meaning of these crucial terms within the referential framework of the present paper. In this paper, the term East Asia does not refer to a geographic or geo-political area, but rather to a cultural zone, one that is defined through various common cultural heritages, especially through the common Confucian ideational tradition. In this sense, Vietnam, for instance, is also part of East Asia, although in a strictly geographic sense it belongs to Southeast Asia.

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When speaking about a “common Confucian tradition” we must ask ourselves how this term, which refers to a complex ideational system, relates to a common East Asian culture and its epistemology. Confucianism as a form of knowledge is a particularly important part of the ideas and ideologies underlying East Asian societies, and constitutes the main body of traditional learning (Li and Yan 2006, 561). Various parts of this multi-faceted ideational system thus form important elements of contemporary East Asian social knowledge. This is a form of knowledge that constitutes an epistemological common thread in societies, cultures, and communities. In contrast to personal knowledge, social knowledge is formed by a common ideational background, which provides a set of evaluative criteria by which incoming information is assessed. In other words: while personal knowledge and justification are based on the coherent integration of individual information, social knowledge and justification are based on the coherent aggregation of social information (Lehrer 1987, 87), as shared by individuals belonging to a certain social group. Here, we must also point out that this kind of social information is not limited to learning or perceiving what is conveyed or represented in the realm of factuality, but also includes ideas and values.

Confucianism as a form of knowledge has had a profound and widespread impact on traditional Asian societies.¹ However, various social transformations in modern times have dislodged traditional and pre-modern forms of Confucianism from the centre of these societies (Li and Yan 2006, 561). On

1 For scholars such as Joseph Levenson, Myron Cohen, and Margery Wolf, Confucianism is an outdated patriarchal ideology whose gradual disappearance is highly desirable, as this would open up areas for the consolidation of a new and much-needed cultural transformation. Instead, for other scholars, Confucianism is a *sine qua non* for any “Chineseness”, and must thus be maintained and further developed in the contemporary world (Ames 2001, 71).

the other hand, the revitalization of traditional Confucian thought is one of the most important intellectual currents in contemporary East Asia. In China, which is the historical “cradle” of Confucian cultures and philosophies, this revitalization began on the threshold of the 20th century, and manifested itself in the intellectual current of so-called New or Modern Confucianism (*Xin ruxue*²).

In international Sinology, this line of thought is translated with various names, ranging from *Neo-Confucianism* or *Contemporary* or *Modern Neo-Confucianism*, to *New Confucianism* and *Modern* or *Contemporary Confucianism*. The first set, which includes the term Neo-Confucianism, is impractical because it is naturally confused with Neo-Confucianism (*sic*), the same term that in Western Sinology denotes the reformed Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming periods (*li xue* or *xingli xue*). I therefore generally prefer the term *Modern Confucianism*, given that we are dealing with philosophical discourses that belong to Chinese modernity.

Because the Confucian renaissance as a new, modern intellectual movement started in China, its main representatives are also mainly found among modern and contemporary Chinese philosophers, although the Confucian revival is increasingly shaping the current academic scene in other East Asian societies. In the present paper, however, we will concentrate upon the work of the central representatives of these currents who lived and worked (or still live and work) in the Chinese linguistic area. In order to clarify the abovementioned research question on the relation between Confucianism as a form of social knowledge on the one hand, and its impact on the specific features of East Asian modernization on the other, we shall thus examine and introduce some of the most important epistemological elements contained in the writings of the most prominent representatives of this revival. These analyses will be based on the works of many philosophers belonging to all three generations of Modern Confucianism,³ including Xiong Shili, Zhang Junmai, and Liang Shuming from the first generation, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi, and Fang Dongmei from the second, and Tu Weiming and Chen Lai from the third.

2 新儒學.

3 The categorization into “generations” follows a long tradition in Confucian scholarship, which is ultimately rooted in classical Confucianism.

Modern Confucianism and the Special Features of East Asian Modernization

Modern Confucianism is defined by a search for syntheses between Euro-American and traditional East Asian thought. It aims to develop a system of values, ideas, and concepts that could prove itself capable of resolving the social, political, and axiological problems of today's globalized, modern societies. In order to establish a model in which modernization is not simply equated or confused with Westernization, scholars who belong to this stream of thought often attempt to revive "classical Confucian" values by adapting and reconciling them with the demands of the present time (see Tu 2000 and 2014).

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In this context, it is important to note that since the latter half of 20th century East Asian societies have been constantly changing the map of world progress, with the balance of economic and political power gradually shifting from the West to the East. This process has its roots in a number of transformations in ideational and material paradigms by which the development of East Asia can be defined, and which also strongly influence international relations at the global level. If we want to understand these transformations in the context of their individual cultural backgrounds, we must adopt a broader perspective, for their internal structures are by no means limited to (visible and measurable) economic, political, and ecological issues. On a deeper ideational level, these transformations are also tightly linked to the political and social roles of culturally conditioned values and ideologies. These – often only latently present – ideational factors represent the crucial axiological and epistemological foundations, as well as an inherent binding, of all the specific institutions that are typical for these societies, and Confucianism is undoubtedly one of these key ideational foundations. It is based on the incorporation of ideas linked to the concept of a "relational self". The concrete collective social consciousness that underlies this mode of (self-)reflection manifests itself in the condition of the relational individual, who is necessarily and existentially an organic part of a social group. Such consciousness is reflected in the manner in which any given individuals come to view themselves as a part of a group, and in which patterns of commonality among individuals bring explicit unity to interpersonal relations. This specific view of the relation between the individual and society has been of crucial importance for shaping the Modern Confucian version of "Chinese" or "East Asian Modernity", for in this renewed system the concept of individualism can be replaced by individualization (Abbeg 1970, 210), i.e. in the full realization of

each individual's potential within the relational network of their interactions with the "Others".

The prevailing classical Western modernization theories have created a tradition that interprets the relation between past and present (i.e. "tradition" and "modernity") in a Eurocentric manner, one that remains globally predominant even today. Although they differ from each other, they still have a common basis, established upon the supposition that "traditional" and "modern" cultures or societies always represent two systems of interrelated variables. In their various reformulations of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, this transition has been understood as a process in which the former falls into decline and the latter is then established (Bendix 1967, 307–8). As such, according to these theories social systems are grounded on a "before and after" model (ibid. 309). In this model, "traditional" and "modern" social structures are distinguished by two sets of dichotomous attributes, and individual societies are classified as more or less "modern" according to the degree to which they exhibit one set of attributes rather than another (Rošker 2015, 13). In this context, tradition and modernity are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change. In such a view, the concept of change in economically growing societies, such as those seen in contemporary East Asia, can be understood as one which is conditioned by a linear development from a traditional, "conservative" past towards a "highly modernized" future. A significant presumption in this bipolar model of change is that the existing institutions and values that form the "content" of tradition are barriers to progress and social change, and are thus seen as obstacles to modernization (ibid.).

Following such ideas, most dominant Western theories of modernization have naturally assumed that East Asia could only develop dynamic, modern societies if it abandoned its most important traditional heritage, namely Confucianism. Indeed, Karl Marx and several other classical Western modernization theorists firmly believed that this ideational system was hindering any kind of real modernization in this part of the world. For example, Max Weber wrote extensively on Asia, especially India and China, concluding that Asian philosophical, religious, or cultural traditions could by no means serve as an ideational basis for social, political, and economic modernization (Makeham 2003, 33).

On the other hand, Joseph R. Gusfield (1967, 351) pointed out that relations between "tradition" and "modernity" do not necessarily imply displacement, exclusiveness or conflicts. Hence, the "modern" must not necessarily or

categorically impair the “traditional”. He noted that traditional forms do not always hinder change and progress, but can also provide support for them.

Modern Confucian scholars also follow similar presumptions. Hence Weber’s widely known thesis, according to which the so-called “Protestant ethic” was instrumental in the rise and spread of modernization, stands in contrast to a presumption that has appeared in East Asia in recent decades, and which is known as the “post-Confucian hypothesis”. This argues that societies based on Confucian ethics might prove themselves as not only equal, but even superior, to the West in terms of modernization, industrialization, and affluence.

The abovementioned revitalization of Confucian thought, which first appeared at the turn of the 20th century and which developed in the theoretical stream of so-called Modern Confucianism, is certainly among the most important factors within such new modernization ideologies (Li 1996, 544). Contemporary Confucian scholars thus generally believe that the successful development of East Asian societies has been, and remains, mostly due to the particular modernization model that has been adopted, one known as “Confucian capitalism” (e.g. Kahn 1979; Vogel 1979).

This model is characterised by strong state leadership with a well-developed administrative structure, a hierarchical social structure with a well-developed network of social relations, and an emphasis on education. It also stresses virtues such as diligence, reliability, and persistence together with cooperation, loyalty, and a strong sense of affiliation with one’s community or organization (Rošker 2015, 3).

In order to acquire a more coherent understanding of the East Asian Confucian revival, its socio-epistemological functions in the modernization process, and its theories, it is also important to understand that it cannot be seen as a monolithic ideational formation. This revival includes a wide scope of theoretical discourses, which are rooted in a tradition that is already in itself very complex and heterogeneous.

Epistemology and Axiology of Social Transformations

Over the last few decades the developmental process of the Confucian revival has been tightly linked to the dynamic and complex social transformations seen in East Asian societies, in which it functions as one of the most important elements of common cultural heritage and social knowledge. In this context, social knowledge can also be defined as one’s ability to understand and predict others’ general patterns of behaviour. Therefore, social

transformations are necessarily linked to simultaneous transformations of social knowledge. The revival of traditional Confucian values thus represents one of these ideational transformations.

As already noted, the Confucian revival is rooted in the presumption that East Asian modernization cannot be completely identified with Westernization, and that the process of modernization necessarily includes both universal and culturally conditioned elements. Here, we cannot forget that the term modernity, which generally denotes a period of social transformation, was developed within Euro-American discourses, and thus defining the “general” theoretical evolution of this concept means (once again) addressing the development of Western theory. Hence, we should also stress that in this context we are not referring to any notion of so-called “classic modernity”, i.e. to the Western “New Era”. We instead apply this term in the sense of a process of general social transformation or social revival, one linked to certain specific conditions that dictate modernization (e.g. the enlightenment movements, the dominant role and function of intellectuals, the spread of industrialization, and so on). Depending on the specific tradition or cultural environment in which they took place, such processes followed different pathways. However, they always involved the transformation of many of the conditions defining transitional societies.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, Southeast Asia has been one of the most dynamic economies in the developing world. This process of economic change has always been accompanied by several other attributes of modernization, such as the spread of education, modern transportation systems, and mass media (Hirschman and Edwards 2007, 4376). The reasons underlying the economic success of some countries and the stagnation of others are still subject to dispute. The East Asian model of state-sponsored export industrialization is widely discussed in academic circles and among policymakers, but the parallels between East and Southeast Asian strategies of economic development remain rather unclear. An important element in this context is the presence of market-driven capitalism. However, the function of the regional governments in managing their economies has also been integral to economic development in the area. Hirschman and Edwards (2007, 4377) also point to the degree to which economic development in the region has been carried out by fairly authoritarian states, stating that: “The relationship between democracy and economic growth and development, argued to go hand in hand by modernization theorists, seemed to be challenged by the experience of Southeast Asian tigers towards the end of the twentieth century” (ibid.). However, a lot of research remains to be done to investigate the

reasons for and implications of economic development and modernization in this area.

In dealing with the relation between economic growth and democracy, we often come across the phrase “Asian values”. This has frequently been used to express a key concept put forward by a number of authoritarian ideologies, which claims that, in order to contain the presumed threat and risks of “Western” individualism within in their own societies, there is a need to promote the “virtues” of Asian communitarianism and rigorous government.

“Asian values” as a doctrine of developmentalism can be understood as the claim that, until prosperity is achieved, democracy remains an “unaffordable luxury”. This “Protestant ethic” form of “Asian values” attributes high growth rates to certain cultural traits. These characteristics include hard work, frugality, discipline, and teamwork. Western democracy hinders rapid development, authoritarian rulers in the Asia Pacific claim, and thus must be delayed until substantial development has been achieved. (Thompson 2001, 155–6)

This ideology thus warns against careless assumptions of “Western” democracy, arguing that it could lead Asian countries down the slippery slope of degeneration. In this way, “Asian values” have become the antithesis of everything that is seen as wrong with the West. The concept is very problematic, however, as it relies on the (wrongly understood) notion of “cultural relativism”, or the idea that human rights are contingent upon Asian cultural heritage (Moody 1996, 166). In such contexts, Western countries are seen as having no right to impose their views, concepts and practices on other cultures.

Even though this notion of “Asian values” has often been closely identified with the Confucian tradition (see, for example, Fetzer and Soper 2007; Yu 2000; de Bary 1998; Lee 2003), this expression, in fact, has almost nothing to do with the Modern Confucian scholars or their philosophies. Hence, it is very important to be aware of the significant differences between modern and contemporary adaptations of Confucian theory and the related discourse on Asian values, which is often mistakenly comprehended as forming part of the Modern Confucian stream of thought.

In general, this stream of thought has nothing against Western influences, as it is even based upon searching for syntheses between Euro-American and traditional Chinese (especially Confucian) discourses. The founders of Modern Confucianism as a system aimed at a more systematic re-interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy and culture, based on a deeper and more

comprehensive understanding of Western philosophy, especially the thought of Plato, Kant and Hegel, as well as other representatives of German Idealism. Given that Modern Confucians viewed modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they explored their own tradition for authentic concepts comparable to the two Western paradigms essential for modernization, i.e. the concepts of subjectivity, and of reason and rationality.

However, this stream of thought also aims to elaborate and modernize some Confucian values that could be used as a counterweight to the general dispersion of values, which is typical for industrial and post-industrial societies. Because one of the central axiological elements accompanying profit-driven capitalistic developments is widespread social alienation, traditional ideational systems have – *inter alia* – been investigated in order to find a solution to the so-called “vacuum of values” that appear as an omnipresent manifestation of this phenomenon. In this context, Modern Confucianism aims to elaborate on traditional epistemological approaches linked to the inherent connections between knowledge and values or knowledge and wisdom, focusing on the cultural and axiological conditionality of comprehension. In this sense, Confucian philosophers have followed the presumption that traditional epistemological and ethical concepts could serve as a foundation for an “East Asian” modernization theory.

Knowledge and Value

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the contributions of Modern Confucianism to the solving of the global crisis of values, the present paper will critically introduce the epistemological thought of some of its most important representatives. It aims to show the development of the traditional Chinese epistemological presumption that moral cultivation is a precondition for any comprehensive knowledge. An implication of this premise is that human perception and comprehension of reality, which is, in itself, permeated by ethical values,⁴ is not only rational, for it is, among other factors, also defined by intentions, desires, and feelings. Modern Confucians assume that the very same demarcation line that divides reason and intuition also divides science and philosophy or the humanities.

In general, Modern Confucians do not oppose science, but are against scientism – the belief that science and the scientific method are the best (or

4 On this basis, the contemporary Chinese philosopher Chen Lai elaborated an ontology of the central Confucian virtue of humanness (*ren*) and introduced a vision of a humanness-based ethics, pertinent to modern times (Lai 2014).

even only) way to obtain the truth about the world and reality. Moreover, most of them argue that science, which aims at the recognition of objects in the external natural world by applying rational and analytical methodology, will never be able to solve questions linked to the meaning of life, nor have a significant impact on an individual's worldview. While science explores facts, philosophy and the humanities investigate meanings and values. As such, Modern Confucians claim that the boundary between reason and intuition not only separates science and philosophy, but also the realm of phenomena from that of values (see, for instance, Xiong 1992, 357; Mou 1995, 549; Fang 1936, 160; Xu 1960, 2; Tang 2000, 293; and others).

Here we shall take into account that in the holistic Confucian tradition epistemology is inseparable from ontology, since every object of cognition is also cognition itself. The concrete manner of an object's existence is therefore tightly linked to our understanding of it. This link is interactive, for it includes mutual co-dependency. We thus cannot oversimplify the Confucian view by claiming that it represents a solipsistic conceptualization of the world. What is true for the perception of the external world also holds for its comprehension and interpretation, which cannot be separated from the whole, but individualized and thoroughly changeable, existence of the objects of cognition.

The main streams of thought in traditional Chinese epistemology were primarily based on the method of introspection and the intuitive perception of reality. In the Neo-Confucianism of the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties (upon which the majority of Modern Confucian discourses are grounded), there were two schools: the first was “realistic”, and was known as the School of the Structure (*Li xue* 理學) or the School of Reason (*Xingli xue* 性理學). Greatly influenced by the teachings of the most important medieval Chinese philosopher, Zhu Xi, this epistemology emphasizes realistic modes for the perception of reality, and it introduced a new methodology suited to this form of recognition called “exploring objects” (*ge wu* 格物). The latter school, which instead advocated more idealistic and intuitive methods of recognizing reality, was named the School of the Heart-Mind (*Xin xue* 心學), and was led by the most famous philosopher of the Ming dynasty, Wang Shouren.⁵ Most Modern Confucian philosophers are more influenced by this latter school of thought than by the more realistic philosophy of Zhu Xi. Moreover, they derive their concept of reason from German philosophy, which generally occupies an important position in their theories.

While Marxist theoreticians (such as Jin Yuelin) prescribed absolute priority to the rational method in China, most Modern Confucians (especially Xiong

5 Also known as Wang Yangming.

Shili and Mou Zongsan) applied the intuitive one. Some of them, however, like Liang Shuming (1924, 97–102) and Zhang Junmai (Chang 1954, 100), drew attention to the traditional binary understanding of reason and intuition. Here, the two methods of inquiry are not only linked to each other, but are also connected to the method of reasoning as such, because reasoning is always based on distinguishing.

In such a view, philosophers who apply the method of intuition must also at the same time apply methods of formal logic and dual differentiations; and those who apply the rational method simultaneously use the intuitive one, as well as dual distinctions.⁶ For Modern Confucians, all these methods – those of dual distinctions and intuition, as well as of formal analysis and inferences – are necessary components for any coherent philosophical activity. However, the recognition obtained from intuitive perception is deeply rooted in cognition, human will, and feelings, and thus represents a synthesis on a high epistemological level. Zhang Junmai, for instance, pointed out that this synthesis cannot be established by study alone, in which intuition and reason appear in a mutually contradictory relation, but only on the basis of much broader platforms (Chang 1954, 100). In this context, Xiong Shili and his student Xu Fuguan upgraded Wang Shouren's method of recognition, which they called *tiren* 體認 (bodily recognition) and *tizhi* 體知 (knowledge obtained through the body), respectively. This method is not based on intuition in the usual sense, nor on rational reasoning about the logical relations between premises and inferences. Instead, *tiren* is a retrospective and active process in which "the subject discovers moral subjectivity in the pseudo-subjectivity of human desires and affirms and develops it" (Ni 2002, 287). Here, the word *ren* (recognition) means both realization and recognition. One reveals one's own moral nature through "overcoming the self" and by "reducing sensual desires" (ibid.).

Most Modern Confucian philosophers are also profoundly interested in questions regarding the nature of the relation between theory and praxis, i.e. between "knowledge and action" (*zhi xing* 知行), which also represented one of the central epistemological problems of traditional, especially Neo-Confucian, discourses⁷ (see for instance He Lin 1938).

6 The comprehension of reality based on the method of dual differentiation and distinction, respectively, is rooted in the awareness of binary oppositions like hard-soft, black-white, pleasure-pain, etc. They form a contrast, through which objects can be easily categorized and hence integrated into the comprehensive perception of reality.

7 In the framework of the Neo-Confucian philosophy (i.e. the reformed Confucian discourses from the Song and Ming dynasties), this view has been elaborated in greatest detail by Wang Shouren and some other representatives of the School of the Heart-Mind (*Xin xue*).

In the traditional Confucian conceptual and referential frameworks, the transcendent and empirical spheres of human performance mostly correspond to the dual antipodes of “inner sage” and “external ruler” (“*neisheng* 內聖” and “*waiwang* 外王”). As Lee Ming-Huei points out (2001, 15), most Modern Confucians see the “inner sage” as a foundation for the concept of the “external ruler”. However, the latter cannot be understood only as a kind of extension of the former. Due to their striving to establish an East Asian theory of modernization, Modern Confucians aim to establish within the complementary relation between the two polar opposites something similar to the Western conception of the subject.

A subject so constituted could thus unite in itself the awareness of the “subject of moral practice” (*daode shijiande zhuti*) in the sphere of spiritual life, the awareness of the “political subject” (*zhengzhi zhuti*) in the field of society, and the awareness of the “cognitive subject” or the “subject of recognition” (*renshi zhuti*) in the realm of epistemology and the natural world. The inner sage thus had to be posited in the complementary relation with a “new external ruler” (*xin waiwang*) who was responsible for the development of science and democracy. (Rošker 2016, 156)

In this process of recognition, the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一), as well as the subject and object of recognition, merge into one. If the subject of recognition wants to gain objective knowledge, it must “immerse” (Ni 2002, 292) itself in the object of recognition, i.e. in all that can be recognized in that object. Only in this way can a certain insight become genuine knowledge. On such a basis, the separation between knowledge and the subject of recognition can be completely eliminated, and the incorporation of what has been recognized becomes a precondition for its actual and complete recognition.

In the Neo-Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming dynasties, the intuitive recognition of reality was closely linked to the concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知), which constitutes the core of the moral nature of any individual. This concept, which can be seen as a creative link connecting fact and value, has profoundly influenced the entirety of Modern Confucian epistemology. For Xiong Shili (1992, 548), one of the pioneers of this stream of thought, this innate knowledge, which manifests itself in the infinite heart-mind (*wuxiande zhixin* 無限的知心) and its phenomenal form denoted by the original heart-mind (*ben xin* 本心), is the basic human moral substance and provides a foundation of moral performance – it is transcendent and

infinitely universal.⁸ Many later Modern Confucians, such as Mou Zongsan (1995, 38) and Tang Junyi (1985, 53–54), have seen it as a kind of moral compass intrinsic to every individual. Similarly, Xu Fuguan appropriated the traditional concept of moral reason (*daode lixing* 道德理性), which serves as a fundamental principle for the guidance and regulation of human life within the moral heart-mind, and manifests itself as an awareness of the good and ethical within the moral self or original heart-mind (Xu 2005, 178). Most Modern Confucian epistemological discourses are also based on the presumption that this awareness is innate to all human beings.

All this led to a modern elaboration of the traditional Confucian moral spirit, which is both immanent and transcendent. The Modern Confucian elaborations of such a moral spirit are based on the internalization of traditional religious concepts, which were transformed and changed from abstract external ideas into symbols denoting different existential forms of the inner moral substance (*ibid.*).

As already noted, Modern Confucian epistemology is closely related to its ontology, for scholars belonging to this current usually see the world as a metaphysical reality that is immanent to all that exists in the universe, while also possessing moral *qualities* (Chan 2002, 306). In this respect, the central Confucian virtue of (co)humanness or mutuality (*ren* 仁) is already part of the cosmic entirety (see Chen 2014), while its recognition, or its simultaneous incorporation and internalization, manifests itself in the moral performance of individuals. Chen Lai, who is one of the most important of today's Chinese philosophers, also points out that the ideational foundations of this virtue form a basis for a unification between the Self and Other, since they are rooted in an awareness of the importance of community, and thus in an awareness of one's own social responsibility (Chen 2014a, 41).

Knowledge and Wisdom

This kind of ethically conditioned knowledge is also tightly connected to the notion of wisdom, or, in other words, to the differentiation between factual and axiological knowledge. In contrast to the former, the latter is not only grounded in perceiving, gathering, and applying factual information, but

8 The human heart-mind (*xin*) as a necessary and constitutional part of the inner moral substance (or the inherent individual moral self) is the key component in the recognition process. When recognizing other human beings, this sensual compatibility must also be based on empathy, a core notion defining the abovementioned central Confucian virtue of humanness (*ren*).

also includes its concrete evaluation, allowing us to apply it in reasonable and ethically irreproachable ways. This kind of knowledge is grounded in an ethically aware understanding and evaluating of different positions in various social contexts. It is rooted in the difference between facts and values, i.e. in a classical epistemological distinction, which appeared in almost all traditional philosophies, and which has gained a lot of attention in modern times in the form of the increasingly problematic relation between science and humanities.

Hence, throughout the 20th century various attempts at clarifying the relation between knowledge and wisdom emerged to the forefront of Modern Confucian philosophies. This task implied the need for a transformation of these traditional discourses, which could not be comprehended, applied, reproduced, or developed beyond the specific frameworks of the Chinese tradition. This aspect has thus been connected to the need for the analytical reconstruction of traditional concepts in the context of social modernization. Most of the Modern Confucians were well aware of the importance of this task, for it preconditioned any possibility of adapting these frameworks to the modern era, and therefore of turning them into a possible foundation of new, contemporary social knowledge. In these endeavours they aimed to fill the emerging “vacuum of values”, which manifested itself in social dispersion and a complete lack of generally binding axiological norms or criteria.

Many Modern Confucians elaborated on the concept of wisdom, as can already be found in Xiong Shili’s theories on the difference between qualitative (*xingzhi* 性智) and quantitative (*liangzhi* 量智) understanding (Rošker 2009, 376). In his *Three Kinds of Philosophical Wisdom* (*Zhexue san hui*, 2007), Fang Dongmei also unites the notions “*li* 理” (reason) and “*qing* 情” (feeling, sensation) into an epistemological concept of “sensuous reason (*qingli* 情理)”. In its unification of rationality and feelings, this notion provides a fundamental and original core, or basis of recognition. Fang thus denoted it as a “seed of wisdom” (*zhihui chongzi* 智慧种子). Tang Junyi’s epistemology also implies both a theory of knowledge and a theory of wisdom. In Tang’s philosophy, intuition and reason are thoroughly interconnected. Based on this interconnection and the mutual influence amongst the different mechanisms and segments of the heart-mind, and with the help of analytical philosophy, Tang formulated an innovative and very interesting hypothesis regarding the creativity of wisdom (*zhihuide chuangzaoxing* 智慧的創造性). For him, knowledge (*zhishi* 知識) includes ideas or concepts, logical cognitive laws, inferences, and empirical intuition. Wisdom, however, is understood as a kind of “miraculous creativity” (*shenmiaode chuangzaoxing* 神秒的創

造性), i.e. a type of intuitive reasoning that is neither completely empirical, nor exclusively rational. It is a kind of thought that can apply previously obtained knowledge, but only based on prior independent decisions for such application. As such, knowledge is both integrated and surpassed. Morality plays a central role in both theories, because it represents the foundation of the self and thus of the heart-mind. In this regard, Tang argues that his concept of rational intuition is able to directly “penetrate” the patterns that were established on the grounds of synthesizing premises, and so can rather easily obtain valid conclusions. This, of course, implies that rational intuition is above logical reason. At the same time, however, Tang believes that pure rational intuition can only lead to knowledge and not wisdom, because it is only capable of non-inferential reasoning. He has also never fully elaborated on or analysed in detail his notion of “miraculous creative wisdom”. All that can be said of this idea is merely that it is founded on the moral heart-mind, which is understood as a vital part of the human self, and that it functions instantly and unconsciously.

In contrast, Mou Zongsan criticized the traditional concepts of intuition and wisdom, claiming that they have had a devastating impact on Chinese history:

Historically, Confucian theoretical works had always treated intuition as a manifestation of the personality of a sage or a saint, i.e. in terms of the magical effects of wisdom... These effects were always posited within humanity (or mutuality, *ren*), and therefore could not be separated from it, even temporarily, in order to gain “pure recognition”. This is why logic and mathematics were never developed in China.⁹ (Mou Zongsan in Han and Zhao 1994, 176)

However, on the basis of elaborating and synthesizing Kant’s epistemology, Mou also developed a concept of specifically Chinese intellectual intuition (*zhide zhi-jue* 智的直覺) that enabled people to perceive and comprehend not only objects from the phenomenal world, but also the sphere of noumena.¹⁰ When manifest in humans, this kind of “divine recognition” (Mou 1971, 51) is certainly a kind of wisdom.

9 在以前的儒家學術發展中，始終是停在聖賢人格中的直覺形態上，及智慧輝妙用的型態...它總是上屬而渾化於仁中，而未暫時脫離呼仁而成為「純粹的知性」。因此，邏輯數學都出不來。

10 Mou Zongsan tried to define the position of reason within traditional Chinese thought by comparing Western and Chinese cultures, arguing that they were based on different representational forms of human reason. He called the Chinese form “functional or intensive” (*lixingzhi yunyong biaoaxian* 理性運用表現) and the Western “constructive or extensive” (*lixingzhi jiagou biaoaxian* 理性架構表現) (Mou 1995, 544–53).

The traditional Confucian notion of wisdom was also developed and modernized by several philosophers, who until recently have not been seen as Modern (or Contemporary) Confucians, but rather as purely Marxist theoreticians. This holds particularly true for Jin Yuelin's student Feng Qi, and his innovative work in the development of Chinese epistemology.

While Jin Yuelin's theories of knowledge were based upon the traditional Western understanding of epistemology as a discipline limited to a pure theory of knowledge, Feng attempted to extend this approach and, based on traditional Chinese discourses, sought to create an epistemology in a broader sense, which he called "expanded epistemology" (*guangyi renshi lun* 廣義認識論).

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He believed that epistemology should not be limited to the theory of knowledge, but should also include the problem of exploring wisdom. In this context, he strove to consider all the basic approaches to the main philosophical issues of both ancient and modern times. For him, these basic approaches were clearly expressed in both Western metaphysical inquiries and in the ancient Chinese methods of cultivating the ideal personality. Similar endeavours were also clearly visible in his general philosophical and/or methodological research, through which he tried to establish a new approach to solving the contradiction between the natural sciences and humanities. His attempt to transcend the boundaries between ignorance and knowledge, and his theory of distinguishing between knowledge and wisdom, not only referred to epistemological problems, but also implied ontological and metaphysical issues. By consistently integrating ontological and ethical suppositions into the framework of his "expanded epistemology", Feng provided a unique and original solution to the dichotomous relations of substance and phenomena. His epistemological system, which included systematic, rational distinctions, as well as a holistic reunification of comprehension, was a felicitous attempt at establishing a theoretical framework that could provide the basis for fresher, more complex methodologies in contemporary theoretical discourses (Feng 1983, 54).

For Chen Lai, wisdom belongs to the four central Confucian virtues, which are categorized into ethics (Chen 2014, 251). Confucianism, since the time of Confucius, emphasizes "practical wisdom" as the realization of philosophy:

This approach accentuates the **practical** aspects of **wisdom** rather than the analytical rationale of the intellect.

Emphasis on **practical wisdom** persistently reinforces a moral foundation that is not differentiated from personal virtue. At the same time, **practical wisdom** in Confucianism stresses self-cultivation, or the complete

transformation of the self, derived from the internal state of the heart/mind (*xin*). Finally, **Confucianism** insists that **practical wisdom** must be transformed into **practical** action. (Chen 2015, 69)

In his commentaries on Feng Youlan's philosophy, Chen Lai also exposes the difference between moral and intellectual (or, in Feng's own words, "non-moral") knowledge, pointing out that they belong to two different categories of rationality. These two types of rationality must be sharply distinguished, for the objects of moral rationality are moral principles, whereas those of intellectual rationality are existing laws (Chen and Xin 2007, 368). He also lays stress upon the fact that one of the main critiques of Confucianism by classical Western theories of modernization was centred on said theories' suppositions that Confucian ethics were incompatible with the rationalization inherent in the process of modernization. In this regard, the very Confucian concept of wisdom was seen as one of the main culprits for this "incompatibleness", because Confucianism allegedly "stressed the wisdom of feelings rather than knowledge born of experience and assessment" (Chen 2009, 234). This was one of the central claims in the theories of Talcott Parsons, Weber's successor, who in the 1960s established the hypothesis that Confucianism was an obstacle to modernization. However, only a decade later the prevailing opinion on the relation between Confucianism and modernization had radically changed, and not only in the Asian academic world, but also in the Euro-American one.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, the Modern Confucian emphasis on the traditional Confucian link between comprehension and the ethical evaluation of being is an important part of the related epistemology. This epistemology, which cannot be separated from ontology, is of utmost importance for the gradual restoration of the "credibility" of ancient Chinese thought in the context of modern social knowledge. In the framework of such onto-epistemological discourses, the imparting of meaning does not refer solely to the subject, but also to their intimate connection with their fellow human beings who are thus seen as being something more than just the "Others". In this sense, such discourses could be well on their way to establishing a new, specifically East Asian model of modernity. Such a model is by no means grounded in individualism, (which is, in the framework of classical Western modernization theories, an absolutely necessary precondition for any kind of modernization), but rather in the abovementioned notion of individualization.

A subject in the sense of a moral self – who is, in addition to analytical and rational skills also endowed with intuition and wisdom – represents one of the possible Modern Confucian responses to the global questions of the present time. These questions are linked to the dilemmas of the modern subject who is trapped within the complex technologies of the profit-seeking natural world, and has thus forgotten the ethical dimensions which define their humanity. A new East Asian social epistemology, which could be based upon the Confucian notions of values and wisdom, might represent an instrumental factor in reviving traditional values and sensibly adapting them to the requirements of the new social knowledge, making them suitable for the lives of people in both modern and post-modern eras. The digital period in which we live is defined by an overflow of factual, auditory, and visual information, along with the accompanying overburdening of people's sensory organs. In such times, wisdom, which is a characteristic feature of Confucian sages, can be more than useful, especially considering the fact that the original meaning¹¹ of the Chinese term sage (*sheng ren*) is "one who listens carefully".

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11 In the oldest Chinese etymological dictionary from the Han dynasty *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, the character *sheng* 聖 (sage, the wise person) is explained as 從耳呈聲, which means that the sound appears through the ears.

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PAN Hongru

A Comparative Study on Chinese vs American Elementary Math Textbooks Through a Transcultural Lens

Abstract

Cultural frameworks remain central to how education is conceptualized and practised worldwide. Although mathematics is often perceived as a neutral discipline, Chinese elementary textbooks subtly embed Confucian values, integrating moral cultivation, while textbooks from the United States reflect Enlightenment-based individualism, prioritizing autonomy and independent learning. This paper compares Grade 3 and Grade 6 math textbooks from the two countries to examine how these cultural traditions are embedded in pedagogy. The findings indicate that Chinese math textbook problems often highlight family, community, and social responsibility, whereas US problems emphasize individual choice, competition, and market-oriented reasoning. By analysing mathematics education through a cultural lens, this study hopes to deepen cross-cultural understanding and suggest new possibilities for educational reform, positioning mathematics not only as a technical discipline but also as a site of moral and cultural formation.

Keywords: Confucian relationism, neoliberal individualism, elementary mathematics education, comparative education, textbook analysis

Introduction

Confucianism, a Chinese philosophy that first emerged over 2,500 years ago, remains deeply embedded in the cultural and educational fabric of modern China. Emphasizing values such as respect for one's elders, filial piety, self-discipline, and the pursuit of knowledge, Confucian ideals continue to influence the principles and practices of modern Chinese education. Moreover, Confucianism has found its way into various facets of Chinese education, including unexpected areas like mathematics. While math is often viewed as a purely technical discipline, Chinese math textbooks subtly incorporate Confucian values to shape students' character alongside their cognitive skills. This integration reflects the broader educational philosophy in China, where academia is intertwined with moral education. Notably, Chinese students consistently outperform their international peers in mathematics, and their instructional methods and pedagogy do not align with educational standards in the United States (US). This raises important questions about the underlying factors contributing to their success.

To better understand these differences, this paper examines the content and structure of their elementary mathematics textbooks from both China and the United States. Textbooks serve as a foundation for curriculum design and instructional practices. In China, math teachers adhere more strictly to textbooks for lesson planning and practice while in the US, math teachers reportedly use about three-quarters of the textbook content to guide classroom instruction.

Previous studies have already compared the pedagogical approaches of the two systems; for instance, studies have contrasted mastery-based learning – which Chinese textbooks emphasize, ensuring students thoroughly grasp concepts before progressing – with the spiral learning approach commonly found in US textbooks, where topics are revisited frequently. However, the cultural dimensions embedded within these textbooks remain unexplored. Although the definition of culture is fluid and ever evolving, as Michael Wesch (2018) states in *The Art of Being Human*, enduring cultural frameworks continue to shape educational practices. Deep-rooted traditions – such as Confucianism in East Asia and Enlightenment-based individualism in the West – persist beneath the surface of evolving systems. By analysing the math textbooks through a cultural lens, this study seeks to uncover how different cultural values shape teaching and learning. This understanding may enhance cross-cultural understanding, inform educational reforms, and ultimately benefit students and educators around the world.

Textbook Selection and Curriculum Differences

In China, elementary mathematics textbooks are standardized and approved by the Ministry of Education, ensuring nationwide consistency with only minor regional variations. The most widely used and officially approved series is *Renjiao Ban* (人教版), meaning the People's Education Edition, published by the People's Education Press. These textbooks undergo major revisions roughly every five to 10 years, triggered by revisions to the national curriculum. For this study, I selected the *Renjiao Ban* Grade 3 and Grade 6 math textbooks, originally published in 2013 and then updated based on the Ministry's revision of curriculum standards in 2022.

By contrast, the US lacks a nationally mandated set of math textbooks. Instead, textbook selection is decentralized, varying by state, school district, or individual school, with choices generally aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Popular elementary math series include *Eureka Math* (Great Minds), *Go Math!* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), *EnVision Math*, and *Bridges in Mathematics*. For comparison, this study uses the Grade 3 and Grade 6 textbooks from *Eureka Math*.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research. For the qualitative component, I use comparative content analysis to systematically compare the content of texts, examining patterns, themes, and structures within a set of texts, comparing how similar content appears in Grade 3 and Grade 6 math textbooks from China and the US. To ensure comparability, I systematically mark and categorize passages from math problems represented in both Chinese and American math textbooks. On the quantitative side, I apply a survey-based method, collecting data from Chinese and American parents to assess their attitudes and opinions toward the math textbooks and the broader education system. To complement the survey findings, I also conduct interviews with four elementary school math teachers – two from China and two from the US – to gain deeper contextual insights.

The Relation Between Individual and Society in The Math Textbooks

The relation between the individual and society is a central theme in education, often shaped by underlying cultural traditions. In China, one of the most enduring influences on educational philosophy is Confucianism. Sometimes referred to as Ruism, Confucianism has evolved over millennia, giving rise to various interpretations across different historical periods. In terms of theory, scholars distinguish between philosophical Confucianism and political Confucianism, both of which share three core principles: 1) an emphasis on social harmony, 2) a commitment to hierarchical relationships, and 3) the cultivation of personal virtue for the sake of societal stability (Rošker, 2023).

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The key distinction lies in how each defines harmony – philosophical Confucianism values harmony through diversity, whereas political Confucianism emphasizes unity and loyalty to state. Despite this difference, the two are deeply interconnected and inseparable – when political Confucianism gains prominence, Confucian ethics and philosophy are widely promoted. Although the political form has risen and fallen with changes in governance (e.g. rejected during the early years of the People's Republic of China as feudal), Confucian ethics – especially those rooted in philosophical Confucianism – have remained deeply embedded in everyday Chinese life.

This moral legacy continues to shape educational content in subtle yet powerful ways. Even in subjects like mathematics – often considered culturally neutral – we can trace Confucian values embedded in elementary textbooks. One of the most prominent is the ethic of relationism, which emphasizes interconnectedness and the individual's role within a social network.

At its core, Confucianism is an ethical system grounded in relational morality: the idea that one becomes a virtuous person through harmonious interactions within a network of defined social roles. This principle is embodied in the fundamental concepts of *ren* (仁) and *li* (礼). The etymological meaning of *ren* is “man in society”, often translated as “humanity” or “co-humaneness”. It embodies the idea of interconnectedness, emphasizing the cultivation of virtue through relationships (Rošker, 2023; Hall and Ames, 1998). *Li* refers to self-cultivation through social interactions. One's ability to engage in relationships – whether through filial piety, brotherhood, or friendship – reflects one's level of *li*. A key traditional Confucian principle, 克己复礼 (*ke ji fu li*), can be translated as: “A return to ritualism through self-control leads one to humaneness.”

This emphasis on self-integration within a larger social context reflects a view of the self as relational rather than autonomous. As Rošker (2023) and Hall and Ames (1998) explain, classical Confucianism does not see the individual and society as opposing forces. Rather, personal identity is forged through social roles, and the internal self is deeply interconnected with its outward relationships.

At first glance, the relational worldview may seem unrelated to mathematics, yet it significantly influences how math problems are framed in elementary textbooks. Many math exercises contain prompts that introduce real-world scenarios for problem-solving, and in Chinese math textbooks these prompts often involve family, community, or group dynamics – contexts that subtly reinforce the Confucian ethic of interconnectedness. In contrast, American math textbooks tend to frame math problems around individual experiences, personal preferences, and consumer choices, reflecting a more individualistic cultural orientation.

A key expression of relationism in Chinese math texts is the emphasis on family relationships, particularly the virtue of filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) – a foundational Confucian value. Math problems often depict children helping their parents or grandparents, reinforcing respect for one's elders and familial duty as everyday norms. For example:

- 14* 妈妈带小亮和妹妹坐长途汽车去看望爷爷奶奶，途中汽车要走308千米。他们上午8时出发，汽车平均每小时行80千米，中午12时能到达吗？

Translation: Mum took Xiaoliang and his sister on a long-distance car trip to visit their grandparents. The car needs to travel 308 kilometres. They set off at 8:00 AM, and the car travels at an average speed of 80 km per hour. Can they arrive by 12:00 PM?

This is a distance-speed-time word problem, also known as a “rate” or “motion” problem. However, beyond the mathematical content, the scenario reflects Confucian values – specifically filial piety (*xiao*, 孝). Visiting grandparents is portrayed as a natural and virtuous act, reinforcing intergenerational bonds and the ethical significance of family relationships in Chinese culture. A similar problem from the American Grade 3 textbook is shown below:

An earthworm tunnels 2 centimeters into the ground each day. The earthworm tunnels at about the same pace every day. How many days will it take the earthworm to tunnel 14 centimeters?

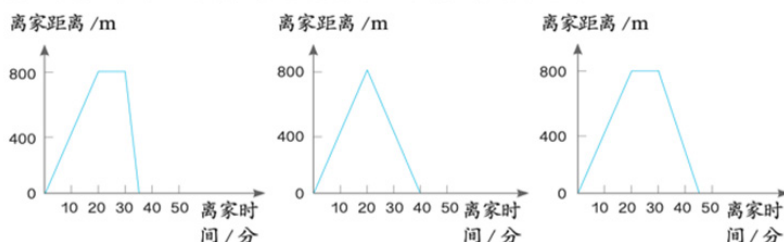
In contrast, the American version presents a neutral, hypothetical context, focused solely on computation. There is no social or ethical subtext, nor any reference to family. In reviewing several US math textbooks, I found no problems mentioning “grandparents”, “grandpa”, or “grandma”. While parents are occasionally referenced, extended family members are notably absent. This absence reflects a more nuclear conception of family, in contrast to the relational values embedded in the Chinese example.

In the next two distance–rate–time problems from the Chinese textbooks, family interactions are central to the scenarios – one featuring a daughter and her parents, the other a grandson and his grandfather.

Example 1:

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- 5 小兰和爸爸、妈妈一起步行到离家 800 m 远的公园健身中心，用时 20 分钟。妈妈到了健身中心后直接返回家里，还是用了 20 分钟。小兰和爸爸一起在健身中心锻炼了 10 分钟。然后小兰跑步回到家中，用了 5 分钟，而爸爸是走回家中，用了 15 分钟。下面哪个图是描述妈妈离家时间和离家距离关系的？哪个是描述爸爸的？哪个是描述小兰的？



Translation: Xiaolan, her father, and her mother walked to the park fitness centre, which is 800 metres away from home, taking 20 minutes. After reaching the fitness centre, the mother immediately returned home, also taking 20 minutes. Xiaolan and her father stayed at the fitness centre for 10 minutes for exercise. Then, Xiaolan ran back home, taking 5 minutes, while her father walked home, taking 15 minutes.

Example 2:

- 5 小明和爷爷一起去操场散步。小明走一圈需要 8 分钟，爷爷走一圈需要 10 分钟。
- (1) 如果两人同时同地出发，相背而行，多少分钟后首次相遇？
 - (2)*如果两人同时同地出发，同方向而行，多少分钟后小明超出爷爷一整圈？

Translation: Xiaoming and Grandpa went for a walk together at the sports field. Xiaoming takes 8 minutes to complete one lap, while Grandpa takes 10 minutes to complete one lap.

1. *If both start at the same time and walk in opposite directions, after how many minutes will they meet for the first time?*
2. **If both start at the same time and walk in the same direction, after how many minutes will Xiaoming overtake Grandpa by one full lap?*

These problems involve shared physical activity and highlight intergenerational bonding, reinforcing relational values embedded in daily life. In contrast, similar problems in US textbooks are framed as individual challenges.

US Examples:

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- 1) *A runner is $\frac{7}{8}$ mile from the finish line. If she can travel $\frac{3}{8}$ mile per minute, how long will it take her to finish the race?*
- 2) *A biker is $\frac{6}{7}$ miles from the finish line. If he can travel $\frac{5}{7}$ miles in one minute, how long until he reaches the finish line?*

Neither scenario involves others, and both focus on personal achievement. In contrast, subsequent examples in the Chinese textbooks go beyond the nuclear family, involving uncles, aunts, and even elderly non-relatives. This reflects the Confucian ethic of relationism, which emphasizes broad, interdependent social ties and cultivates a sense of collective responsibility and cohesion.

- ③ 小明一家去采摘。爷爷、爸爸、外公、舅妈、小明、叔叔 6 人采摘了西红柿，奶奶、妈妈、爷爷、小明 4 人采摘了草莓，姑姑、舅舅、外婆 3 人采摘了黄瓜。

采摘西红柿



采摘草莓



采摘黄瓜



- (1) 采摘西红柿和黄瓜的共有几人?
- (2) 采摘西红柿和草莓的共有几人?

Translation: Xiaoming's family went fruit picking.

- *Grandpa, Dad, Maternal Grandpa, Uncle, Xiaoming, and Grandma (6 people) picked persimmons.*
- *Grandma, Mom, Grandpa, and Xiaoming (4 people) picked strawberries.*
- *Paternal Grandma, Maternal Grandma, and Maternal Grandmother (3 people) picked melons.*

Questions:

1. *How many people picked both persimmons and melons?*
2. *How many people picked both persimmons and strawberries?*

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This is a set theory and intersection problem, as it requires identifying the overlap between different groups of people based on their fruit-picking activities. Extended love towards further family members is shown in this example. As Cantero (2021) notes, Confucian relationism begins with the family and radiates outward to encompass the community and natural world. This relational worldview was also emphasized by Mencius, who stated, “The basis of the world is the state; the basis of the state is the family; and the basis of the family is the individual” (*Mengzi*, Li Lou 1:5). He also advocated the extension of familial love outward through “推善其所为”¹² – what Confucius called the principles of *Zhong* (conscientiousness) and *Shu* (altruism) – as a path toward human-heartedness (*Ren*). Unsurprisingly, I found no comparable problems in US math textbooks. This may stem from the cultural framing of US problems, which tend to focus on individuals rather than group-based interactions – thus offering fewer opportunities for exploring intersections between social sets.

The next example shows the bonding within the school community. As a student, the second most significant social relationship, after family, is school. The emphasis on the school environment is frequently reflected in Chinese math problems. For example, a Grade 3 Chinese math textbook presents the following addition problem:

12 “推善其所为” (*tuī shàn qí suǒ wéi*) meaning “extend the goodness in one’s actions”. This comes from Mencian Confucian thought, and it plays a role in his broader theory of extending moral concern outward from the family to society.



Translation: This image consists of four separate illustrations, each depicting groups of students standing together in an outdoor setting. Each group is holding a sign indicating their respective class and the number of students in that class.

Based on this set of pictures, an exercise dedicated to teaching students how to solve addition problems using mental math strategies is then presented.

1 (1) 一年级一共需要多少个座位?

$$35 + 34 = \underline{\quad}$$

你是怎样口算的? 和同学交流一下。

先算 $35 + 30 = 65$,
再算 $65 + 4 = \dots$

$35 + 34 = 69$

30 4
65

先算 $30 + 30 = 60$,
再算 $5 + 4 = 9 \dots$

$35 + 34 = 69$

30 5 30 4
60 9

(2) 二年级一共需要多少个座位?

$$39 + 44 = \underline{\quad}$$

先算 $39 + 40 = 79$, 再算 $79 + 4 = \dots$

$39 + 44 = 83$

40 4
79

想一想: 还可以怎样算?

A similar addition and multiplication math problem is illustrated in the US textbook in a different form:

1. Label the array. Then, fill in the blanks below to make true number sentences.

a. $6 \times 4 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$



$(5 \times 4) = \underline{20}$

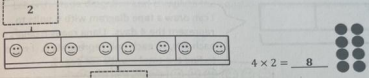
$(\hspace{1cm} \times 4) = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ $(6 \times 4) = (5 \times 4) + (\hspace{1cm} \times 4)$

$= \underline{20} + \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

$= \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

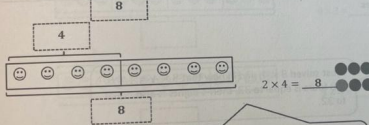
1. Label the tape diagrams, and complete the equations. Then, draw an array to represent the problems.

$4 \times 2 = \underline{8}$



The tape diagram shows 4 units of 2. I can draw an array with 4 rows of 2.

$2 \times 4 = \underline{8}$



The tape diagram shows 2 units of 4. I can draw an array with 2 rows of 4.

One tape diagram shows 2 units of 4, and the other shows 4 units of 2. The pictures look different, but they both show a total of 8.

As shown above, the US version of the addition and multiplication problem focuses on numbers and symbols along, with no reference to people, let alone social relationships. Another example for the different approaches to the sense of community is shown in the exact same addition problem in a Chinese textbook, presented below:



每个方阵有 108 名学生，3 个方阵共有多少名学生？

Each formation has 108 students. How many students are there in total in 3 formations?

Here, we see three groups of classmates dressed alike and making the same gestures in formation – once again emphasizing a sense of community, as in the earlier example. While some may interpret this as reflecting socialist values, I will later address this point in my discussion on the misuse of Confucianism in modern Chinese education. In contrast, a US addition problem that touches on community presents a markedly different tone, revealing a distinct cultural attitude toward the group and the individual, as shown below:

3. The Blue Team runs a relay. The chart shows the time, in minutes, that each team member spends running.

a. How many minutes does it take the Blue Team to run the relay?

Blue Team	Time in Minutes
Jen	5 minutes
Kristin	7 minutes
Lester	6 minutes
Evy	8 minutes
Total	

b. It takes the Red Team 37 minutes to run the relay. Estimate, and then find the actual difference in time between the two teams.

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(P172)

In this scenario, each individual is named and involved in a team competition – something rarely seen in Chinese textbooks. Beyond the school community, Chinese math textbooks often highlight other types of community members. In Confucian tradition, elderly neighbours are respected and often addressed by children as “grandpa” or “grandma”, regardless of blood relation. The distinction lies in the use of surnames: for actual grandparents, no surname is added, while unrelated elders are referred to with their family names – for example, “Grandma Li” or “Grandpa Wang”. In the Grade 3 textbook, there is a multiplication and addition question involving a Grandma Li:

- 6 (1) 李奶奶养了6只鹅，养的鸭的只数是鹅的7倍。李奶奶养了多少只鸭？
- (2) 李奶奶养了6只鹅，42只鸭。鸭的只数是鹅的几倍？

Grandma Li raised 6 geese, and the number of ducks she raised is 7 times the number of geese. How many ducks did Grandma Li raise? Grandma Li raised 6 geese and 42 ducks. The number of ducks is how many times the number of geese?

Grandma Li is likely a non-family elder from the neighbourhood or broader community. The inclusion of her poultry-raising activity in a math problem

suggests a cultural norm of attentiveness and care toward elderly community members. This reflects Confucian values that extend beyond the family to the wider society. Similar examples in Chinese textbooks emphasize compassion and relational awareness toward others, even when they are not kin. In contrast, consider an example for multiplication and addition math problems from the US math textbook, which is more concerned with individuals' activities:

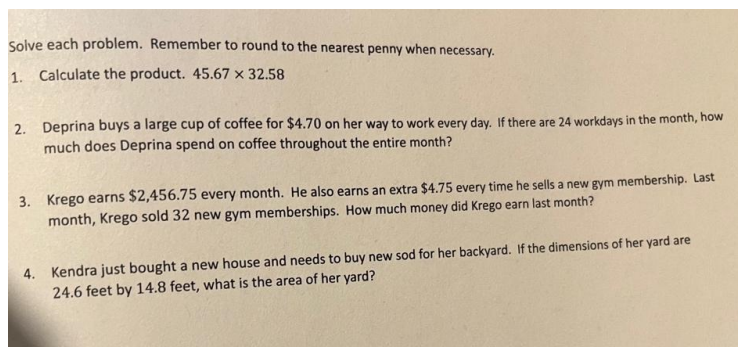
Ari sells 6 boxes of pens at the school store. a) each box of pens sells for \$7. Draw a tape diagram and label the total amount of money he makes as m . Write an equation. b). Each box contains 6 pens. Draw a tape diagram, and label the total number of pens as p . Write an equation, and solve for p .

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This is a straightforward business-style problem focused on a single person's transactions. Such selling and buying scenarios are common in US math textbooks. Another example for a multiplication problem is as follows:

Denice buys 7 movies. Each movie costs \$9. What is the total cost of 7 movies?

Numerous additional examples of buying and selling scenarios appear throughout the two US math textbooks analysed here, further illustrating the emphasis on individual, transactional contexts



A notable pattern across the Chinese math textbook examples is the absence of full names. Characters are typically referred to by generic labels such as “classmate”, “Little Liang”, or “Little Ming”. Within the examples already discussed, “Little Ming” appears multiple times. These names, derived from family surnames, imply roles within the family – e.g., “Little Liang” means “the youngest member of the Liang family”. “Little Ming” has become an

iconic, almost symbolic figure in Chinese educational materials, frequently portrayed as a diligent, respectful, and family-oriented student. In contrast, US math textbooks feature a broader range of named individuals, often with distinct personalities, activities, or even entrepreneurial roles. This contrast reflects broader cultural orientations: Chinese textbooks emphasize relational identity and social roles, while US textbooks prioritize individual traits and personal agency. In the next two examples, we see the emphasis on group collaboration, which is also an important value of Confucian ethics of relationism.

- 9 植树队要种 300 棵树。甲队单独种，种完需要 8 天；乙队单独种，种完需要 10 天。现在两队合种，5 天能种完吗？

Translation: The tree-planting team needs to plant 300 trees. Team A alone takes 8 days to complete the planting. Team B alone takes 10 days to complete the planting. If both teams work together, can they finish planting in 5 days?

- 6 挖一条水渠，王伯伯每天能挖整条水渠的 $\frac{1}{20}$ ，李叔叔每天能挖整条水渠的 $\frac{1}{30}$ 。两人合作，几天能挖完？

Translation: To dig a canal: Uncle Wang can dig $\frac{1}{20}$ of the entire canal per day. Uncle Li can dig $\frac{1}{30}$ of the entire canal per day. If they work together, how many days will it take to complete the canal?

Both examples illustrate measurement division problems. However, similar division math problems in US math textbooks are framed within markedly different narratives. Consider the following two examples:

- 1) Kaliah spent $\frac{2}{3}$ of her money on an outfit. She spent $\frac{3}{8}$ of the remaining money on a necklace. If she has \$15 left, how much did the outfit cost?
- 2) Parks spent $\frac{1}{3}$ of his money on a sweater. He spent $\frac{3}{5}$ of the remainder on a pair of jeans. If he has \$36 left, how much did the sweater cost?

Here, both examples focus on how to spend money and consumer behaviour, which is rarely shown in the Chinese textbooks.

In the following two math problems in the Chinese textbooks, collaborative social achievements are even more highlighted, from a large community to a national level.

- 3 神舟十号载人飞船在轨飞行约 15 天，相当于神舟十三号载人飞船在轨飞行时间的 $\frac{5}{61}$ 。神舟十三号载人飞船在轨飞行约多少天？



Translation: The Shenzhou 10 manned spacecraft remained in orbit for approximately 15 days, which was $\frac{5}{61}$ of the time the Shenzhou 13 manned spacecraft stayed in orbit.

How many days did the Shenzhou 13 manned spacecraft remain in orbit? (A photo of a spacecraft orbiting Earth is shown on the right.)

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- 1 我国幅员辽阔，东西相距约 5200 km，东西距离是南北的 $\frac{52}{55}$ 。南北相距约多少千米？

China is a vast country with a width from east to west of approximately 5,200 km. The east-west distance is $\frac{52}{55}$ of the north-south distance. Approximately how many kilometres is the north-south distance?

These two examples are multiply-to-divide problems, where multiplication is used to solve a division question by applying inverse operations. US textbooks contain similar mathematical structures, such as:

- 1) *Summer used $\frac{2}{5}$ of her ground beef to make burgers. If she used $\frac{3}{4}$ pounds of beef, how much beef did she have at first?*
- 2) *Alistair has 5 half-pound chocolate bars. It has $\frac{3}{2}$ pounds of chocolate, broken into chunks, to make a batch of cookie. How many batches can Alistair make with the chocolate he has on hand?*

While mathematically equivalent, these problems diverge sharply in context. The US examples centre on individual consumption, ownership, and personal decision-making – reflecting a cultural emphasis on autonomy and economic agency. In contrast, the Chinese examples are embedded in broader, collective contexts, such as national geography or space exploration, situating the learner within civic or communal narratives.

This contrast suggests a deeper cultural orientation. US math problems often highlight the autonomous individual as an economic actor, making personal

decisions about resources. By contrast, Chinese math problems tend to embed the learner in a relational or communal framework, where mathematics is used to understand and support collective life – be it family, school, environment, or nation. The presence of state-led projects, public welfare themes, and environmental efforts in Chinese math word problems reveals an underlying ethic of social responsibility, aligning with Confucian ideals of relational selfhood and societal harmony.

Holistic Confucian Humanism

It is widely recognized that Confucius, who lived slightly before Democritus and Protagoras, passed on a wealth of improving advice to his followers, later compiled into the *Analects*. At the heart of these teachings is the concept of *ren* (仁), commonly translated as *benevolence*, *goodness*, *virtue*, *ethical wisdom* and recently most often as *humaneness*. The concept of *ren* (仁) is very close to that of *humanitas* (Bakewell, 2023). While western humanism is often traced to Cicero, or earlier to the pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras, whose well-known statement – referred to in philosophy as the *homo mensura* thesis – serves as a foundational expression of human-centred thought (Plato, 1856, 9/152a/) – the term *humanism* itself emerged only in 1808 with Immanuel Niethammer's *The Conflict Between Philanthropism and Humanism in the Educational Theory of Our Time* (Rošker, 2024). The initial phase of European humanism, also known as Renaissance humanism, emphasized a break from medieval dogma, while the second phase, Enlightenment humanism, advanced ideals of critical reason, self-governance, and individual autonomy. By contrast, Confucian humanism focuses less on the individual intellectual exploration or the responsibility of the self-governing individual but more on being ethical towards others in an interconnected human relationship and further extends to heaven and earth.

As the *Doctrine of the Mean* suggests: “One cannot perfect oneself while disregarding the perfection of others. One can develop one’s nature to the utmost only through the human relationships – that is, within the sphere of society.” In Confucian thought, because the concept of humanism is closely tied to *ren* (仁), a *junzi* (君子), or noble person, is one who cultivates virtue and continually strives for self-improvement as part of the process of humanization. Positioned just below the sage, a *junzi* is expected to embody and practice *ren* in daily life. In contrast, the *xiao ren* (小人), or petty person, is driven by self-interest and egoism, lacking the broader moral responsibility that defines humanistic values. As Confucius notes: “the superior man

comprehends *yi* (righteousness); the small man comprehends *li* (profit)" (Analects, IV.16).

Furthermore, the concept of *tian ren he yi* (天人合一), often translated as "the unity of heaven and humanity", reflects the holistic orientation of Confucian humanism (Tu, 1985). In this worldview, the self is not an isolated individual but an ethical being formed through relationships – with others, with society, and with the natural world. The full realization of the Confucian self thus depends on the cultivation and practice of *ren*, understood as both the foundation of morality and the essence of being human. This Confucian humanistic ideal is reflected in Chinese math textbooks, where moral lessons are embedded in math problem-solving. One example is a math problem centred on donating to the Hope Primary School (希望小学), reinforcing the value of generosity and social responsibility.

2. 减法

在“心连心”读书活动中，光明小学各年级为希望小学捐赠了一些图书。

光明小学各年级捐赠图书情况统计表

年级	一	二	三	四	五	六
图书本数	98	124	145	217	276	301

1 五年级比二年级多捐多少本图书？

$$276 - 124 = \underline{\quad}$$

怎样列竖式？从哪一位减起？



$$\begin{array}{r} 276 \\ - 124 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Translation: During the "Heart-to-Heart" reading activity, each grade at Guangming Primary School donated some books to a Hope Primary School. Table: Statistics of Book Donations by Each Grade at Guangming Primary School

Grade	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Number of Books	98	124	145	217	276	301

How many more books did the fifth grade donate compared to the second grade? $276 - 124 = \underline{\quad}$ [Robot character: "How do we write this vertically? Which place value do we start subtracting from?"]

This is a simple subtraction problem, but the textbook designer took the opportunity to introduce the humanistic value. A subtraction problem from the US textbook is shown below:

1. Solve the subtraction problems below.

a. $370 \text{ cm} - 90 \text{ cm} = 280 \text{ cm}$

b. $800 \text{ mL} - 126 \text{ mL}$

$\begin{array}{r} 7 \text{ } 10 \\ 800 \\ - 126 \\ \hline \end{array}$

$\begin{array}{r} 9 \\ 7 \text{ } 10 \\ 800 \\ - 126 \\ \hline \end{array}$

$\begin{array}{r} 9 \\ 7 \text{ } 10 \\ 800 \\ - 126 \\ \hline 674 \end{array}$

I can use mental math to solve this subtraction problem. I do not have to write it out vertically. Using the compensation strategy, I can add 10 to both numbers and think of the problem as $380 - 100$, which is an easy calculation. The answer is 280 cm.

Before I subtract, I need to see if any tens or hundreds need to be unbundled. There are not enough ones to subtract, so I can unbundle 1 ten to make 10 ones. But there are 0 tens, so I can unbundle 1 hundred to make 10 tens. Then there are 7 hundreds and 10 tens.

I still am not ready to subtract because I have to unbundle 1 ten to make 10 ones. Then there are 9 tens and 10 ones.

After unbundling, I see that I have 7 hundreds, 9 tens, and 10 ones. Now I am ready to subtract. Since I've prepared my numbers all at once, I can choose to subtract left to right, or right to left. The answer is 674 mL.

This example is a pure math number question without any storyline. Another example of a subtraction math problem that does involve human behaviours is shown below:

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Mr. Williams owns a gas station. He sells 367 liters of gas in the morning, 300 liters of gas in the afternoon, and 219 liters of gas in the evening. A. Estimate and find the actual total amount of gas he sells in one day. B. Estimate, and then find the actual difference between the amount of gas Mr. Williams sells in the morning and the amount he sells in the evening.

This example centres on individual economic activity.

Turning back to Confucian holistic humanism, it extends beyond interpersonal ethics to include harmony with nature. Through the practice of *ren* (仁), individuals strive for unity between heaven and humanity (*tian ren he yi*, 天人合一), realizing a meaningful existence within a broader cosmic order. This vision emphasizes integrated moral cultivation – self, family, society, and the environment – as a foundation for peace and harmony. Reflecting this ethos, many Chinese math problems incorporate environmental and ecological themes, echoing the principles of ecological Confucianism advanced by contemporary scholars. For instance, a situation of two groups collecting mineral water bottles to protect the environment is shown in the following addition problem:

- ④ 两个小组回收矿泉水瓶的情况见右表。这两个小组一共回收了多少个矿泉水瓶？

小组	一组	二组
个数	36	27

Translation: The situation of the two groups collecting mineral water bottles is shown in the table on the right. How many mineral water bottles did the two groups collect in total?

A similar question from a US textbook is shown below:

2. The liquid volume of five drinks is shown below.

Drink	Liquid Volume
Apple juice	125 mL
Milk	236 mL
Water	248 mL
Orange juice	174 mL
Fruit punch	208 mL

a. Jen drinks the apple juice and the water. How many milliliters does she drink in all?

Jen drinks _____ mL.

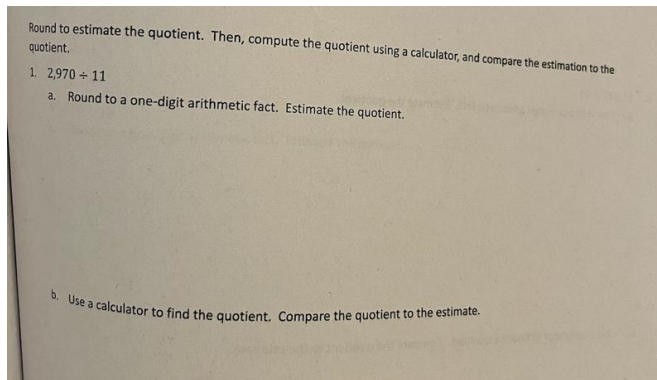
b. Kevin drinks the milk and the fruit punch. How many milliliters does he drink in all?

This example presents an addition problem, featuring Jen and Kevin making individual choices about the beverages they drink. It exemplifies a broader contrast between Chinese and US math problems: the former often emphasize group identity, social responsibility, and communal care, while the latter highlight individual preferences, personal autonomy, and independent decision-making. Another example presents ecological Confucianism in a Chinese math textbook:

- 4 经过防沙治沙综合治理，西部某沙漠完全沙化的面积已由原来的大约 1.8 万平方千米缩小为约 1.2 万平方千米，完全沙化的面积大约减少了百分之多少？

Translation: After comprehensive sand control and desertification prevention measures, the completely desertified area of a certain desert in the western region has been reduced from approximately 18,000 square kilometres to about 12,000 square kilometres. By approximately what percentage has the completely desertified area decreased?

For division problems like this, the US textbooks would sometimes simply provide a few numbers and ask the student to use a calculator to find the quotient:



More division problems shown in Grade 6 Chinese textbooks are concerned with waste, recycling and environmental issues, as shown in the following example:

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- 12 再生纸是以废纸为原料加工生产出来的纸张, 被誉为低能耗、轻污染的环保型用纸。回收的废纸可以加工出相当于废纸原重 $\frac{4}{5}$ 的再生纸。



这是用再生纸制作的笔记本。



- (1) 李阿姨的办公室整理出 80 kg 废旧报纸、书籍, 如果用于制造再生纸, 可以制成多少千克的再生纸?
- (2) 据中国造纸协会统计, 2021 年全国纸及纸板消费量约 12650 万吨, 如果其中有 $\frac{2}{5}$ 可回收利用, 可回收利用的纸及纸板大约有多少万吨?

Translation: Recycled paper is made by processing wastepaper as raw material. It is known as an environmentally friendly paper with low energy consumption and low pollution. Recovered wastepaper can be processed into recycled paper that weighs $\frac{4}{5}$ of the original wastepaper weight. (1) Li Amei's office sorted out 80 kg of old newspapers and books. If they are used to produce recycled paper, how many kilograms of recycled paper can be made?

(2) According to the China Paper Association, the total consumption of paper and paperboard in China in 2021 was approximately 126.5 million tons. If $\frac{2}{5}$ of it can be recycled, how many million tons of paper and paperboard can be recovered? [The image also features a robot character saying: "This is a notebook made from recycled paper."]

Another division problem is also contextualized with a recycling issue, as shown below:

- 14 一个垃圾处理场平均每天收到 70 t 生活垃圾, 其中可回收利用的垃圾占 $\frac{1}{3}$ 。这个垃圾处理场 15 天收到的垃圾中有多少吨可回收利用?

Translation: A garbage disposal site receives an average of 70 tons of household waste per day, of which $\frac{1}{3}$ is recyclable. How many tons of waste can be recycled from the waste collected at this site over 15 days?

Another two examples are concerned with the issue of saving water:

小飞家原来每月用水约 10 t, 更换了节水龙头后每月用水约 9 t, 每月用水比原来节约了百分之多少?

Translation: Xiaofei's family originally used 10 tons of water per month. After replacing the faucet with a water-saving one, their monthly water usage was reduced to 9 tons. By what percentage did their monthly water consumption decrease compared to the original amount?



Saving Water, Start with Me

Every year, March 22 is World Water Day. In 2017, the per capita renewable freshwater resources worldwide were 5,732 cubic metres, while in China it was only 2,029 cubic metres per person. China is a country with severe water scarcity, and everyone should develop good habits to conserve water.

Classroom Activity Suggestions:

- 1. Observe and determine if there is any water wastage in daily life. If so, measure the amount of water wasted within a certain time frame and report your findings.*
- 2. If possible, create a bulletin board or collect materials related to water conservation.*

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Illustration Dialogue:

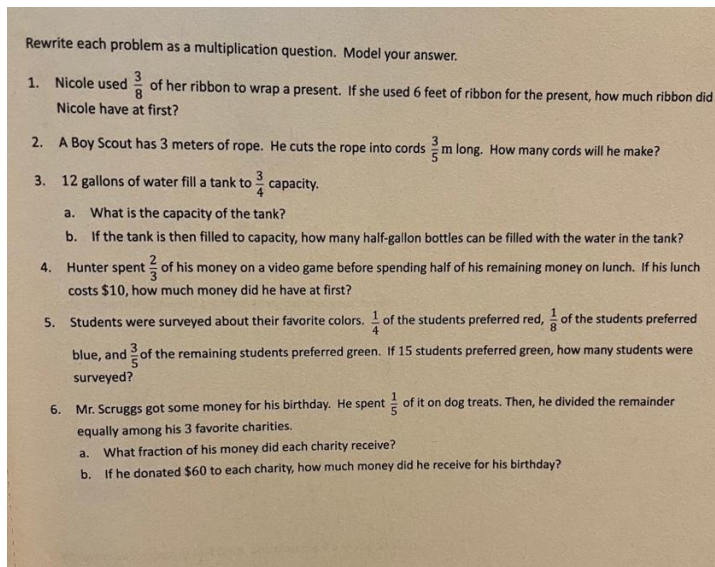
- *Student 1: "Li Ming's faucet is leaking water. This is the water wasted in 10 minutes."*
- *Student 2: "This is the water wasted from another faucet in 1 minute."*
- *Student 3: "Do all faucets leak the same amount of water?"*
- *Student 4: "No, different faucets leak different amounts of water."*
- *Student 5: "What kind of methods can we use to reduce water leakage?"*

- 8 (1) 五年级同学回收了 165 个易拉罐，六年级比五年级多回收了 $\frac{2}{11}$ 。六年级同学回收了多少个易拉罐？

- (2) 四年级比六年级少回收了 $\frac{1}{3}$ ，四年级同学回收了多少个易拉罐？

Translation: The fifth-grade students collected 165 aluminium cans. The sixth-grade students collected $\frac{2}{11}$ more than the fifth grade. How many cans did the sixth-grade students collect? The fourth-grade students collected $\frac{1}{3}$ fewer cans than the sixth grade. How many cans did the fourth-grade students collect?

The five preceding examples from Chinese math textbooks follow a consistent format, integrating environmental themes and emphasizing individual contributions to collective ecological responsibility. In contrast, a comparable set of division problems in US textbooks centres on personal decisions and individual actions. One particularly notable case is question 6, shown below, in which Mr Scruggs receives birthday money, spends $\frac{1}{5}$ on dog treats, and donates the remainder to his favourite charities. While this resembles the donation scenario found in Chinese textbooks, the framing differs: here, charitable giving is portrayed as a matter of personal preference – comparable to shopping – rather than a social obligation. The prioritization of the pet over charitable causes further reflects a cultural emphasis on individual autonomy and lifestyle choices, revealing subtle differences in how moral behaviour is framed in each educational context.



Notably, holistic Confucian humanism, which upholds the principle of *tian ren he yi* (“the unity of heaven and humanity”), is neither purely secular nor anthropocentric. Rather, it extends beyond human concerns to encompass animals and the entire ecosystem. This emphasis on ecological harmony is reflected in many math questions in the Chinese textbooks, where the principles of ecological Confucianism are evident.

Here is a simple addition problem showing concern for birds and reptiles in wetlands.

1 我国湿地有鸟类和爬行类动物共多少种？

$$271 + 122 = \underline{\quad}$$

想一想：竖式应该怎样写？

$$\begin{array}{r} 271 \\ + 122 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

从哪一位加起？



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Translation: How many species of birds and reptiles are there in the wetlands of China? $271 + 122 = \underline{\quad}$ Think about it: How should the vertical addition be written?

- 2 1999 年我国藏羚羊的数量是 7 万只左右，到 2021 年年底增加到 30 万只左右。2021 年年底藏羚羊的数量比 1999 年增加了百分之多少？



Translation: In 1999, the number of Tibetan antelopes in China was approximately 70,000. By the end of 2021, the population had increased to around 300,000. By what percentage did the number of Tibetan antelopes increase in 2021 compared to 1999?

Tibetan antelopes were once on the brink of extinction. To raise awareness about protecting this endangered species, China has actively promoted conservation efforts. I remember reading numerous articles about their plight in Chinese literature textbooks as I grew up. It is encouraging to see that the number of Tibetan antelopes is now on the rise. This recovery is not just a triumph of policy and science, but also resonates with the values embedded in *ecological Confucianism* – as mentioned earlier – a modern reinterpretation of classical Confucian thought in response to environmental crises. In Confucian philosophy, nature is not an external, exploitable resource but part of a continuous moral and cosmological order that includes humans, animals,

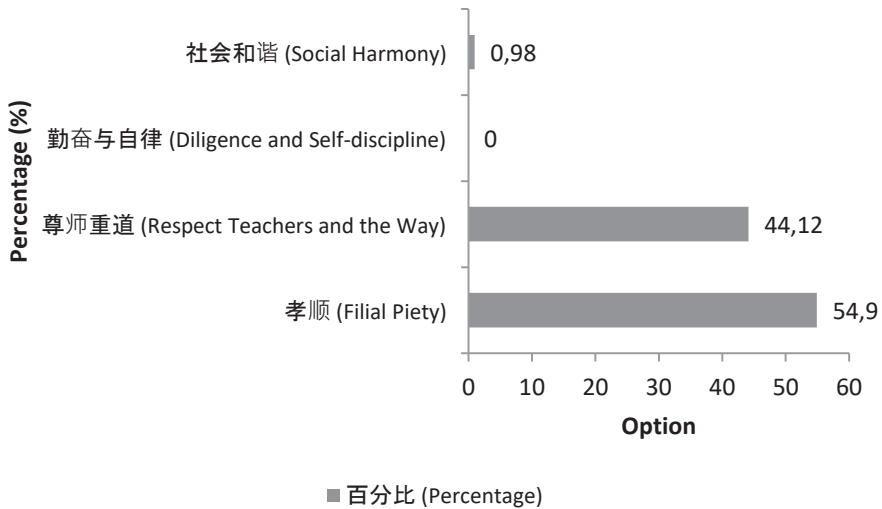
and the broader environment. The principle of “the unity of heaven and humanity” (*tian ren he yi*) expresses this interdependence, suggesting that ethical human conduct must be harmonized with the rhythms and needs of the natural world. Within this framework, protecting species like the Tibetan antelope is not simply a scientific or utilitarian concern, but a moral obligation – a way of cultivating *ren* (仁), or humaneness, through the respectful stewardship of life. Ecological Confucianism emphasizes restraint, relationality, and balance, countering anthropocentric and extractive attitudes with a vision of coexistence. The rise in the Tibetan antelope population thus becomes more than an ecological statistic, as it symbolizes a broader cultural shift toward harmony with nature. Tu Weiming (2001) describes this holistic model as anthropocosmic – where moral cultivation influences society and the cosmos. Furthermore, Brasovan (2016) frames ecological Confucianism as a necessary response to environmental degradation, as reflected in the math textbook content on recycling and water conservation.

After encountering numerous examples that contain Confucian ethical messages, a question arises: How are these moral elements perceived by teachers, students, and parents? Are they viewed as valuable components of education or as distractions from core mathematical learning? The responses were mixed. Interviews with Chinese math teachers revealed overwhelmingly positive attitudes, as they recognize these messages as part of Holistic Humanistic Education (全人教育) – also known as whole-person cultivation – a key educational approach, which is in line with Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation, as currently promoted in China. A teacher named Li, one of the educators interviewed, emphasized that this philosophy seeks to nurture students not only academically but also in their personal and moral development. However, the Parents’ views were more divided. Some expressed concern that the narrative complexity of ethically framed math problems might hinder their children’s focus on computational skills. Others appreciated the contextualized content, believing it made mathematics more meaningful and engaging.

A Western parallel to Holistic Humanistic Education (全人教育) can be found in the concept of pansophism, developed by the Czech educator John Amos Comenius – often referred to as the “father of modern education”. Widely respected in China’s early childhood education discourse, Comenius envisioned education as universal, holistic, and interdisciplinary (Comenius, 1967). Pansophism integrates science, ethics, philosophy, and theology to cultivate the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of the learner, ultimately aiming for peace and harmony through comprehensive understanding. To further

explore parental perspectives, a questionnaire was distributed to parents of primary school students, focusing on the perceived role of Confucianism in their children's education. When asked to identify the Confucian values they deemed most important for their children to learn, the following results emerged:

Translation:

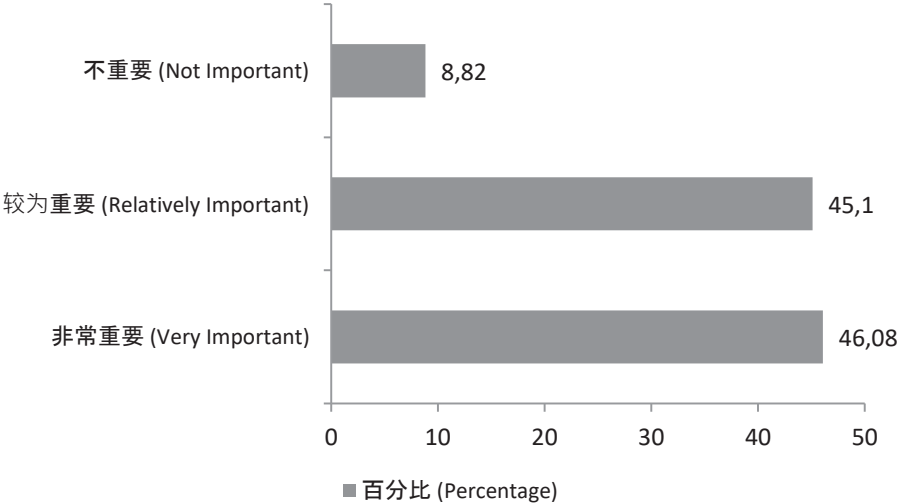


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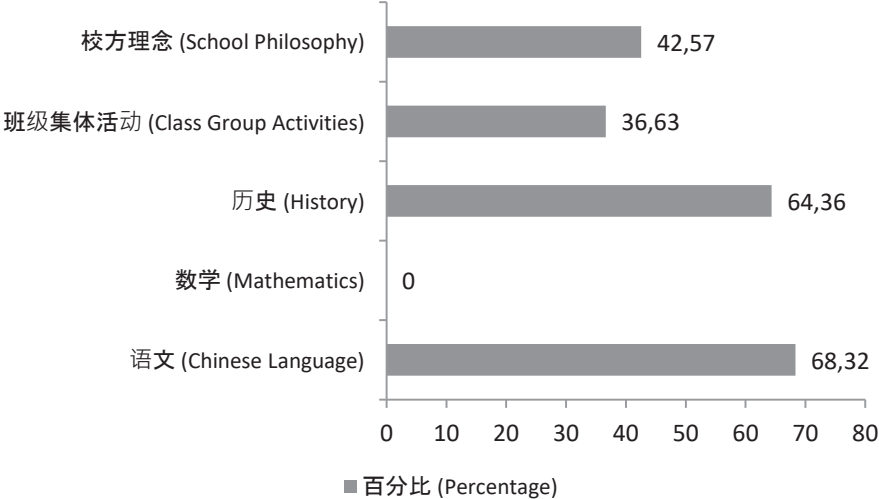
Values	Percentage
Filial Piety	54.9%
Respect for Teachers	44.1%
Social Harmony	1.0%
Diligence and Self-Discipline	0.0%

As the question allowed multiple selections, over 99% of respondents chose values such as filial piety and respect for teachers. This suggests that Confucianism is perceived not as a single dominant value but as a constellation of moral principles, each regarded as equally important in the minds of parents. In response to the question “*How important is it for your child's school curriculum to include traditional Chinese cultural education, including Confucian teachings?*”, the results were as follows:

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Very Important	47	46,08
Relatively Important	46	45,1
Not Important	9	8,82



As we can see, among the 102 responses, 46.1% indicated that they believe it is very important to incorporate traditional Chinese cultural education, including Confucian teachings, into the school curriculum. However, when asked which specific subjects they think are best suited for this, the answers were as follows:



The results revealed that 68.3% of parents associated Confucian teachings primarily with subjects such as Chinese language, literature, and history, with none seeing a connection with mathematics education. This perception, however, might shift with a closer examination of contemporary math textbooks. In response to an open-ended question about the relevance of Confucian values in modern society, parental opinions were mixed. While many acknowledged the value of Confucianism – particularly its emphasis on moral development and social harmony – others expressed reservations. Some criticized the tradition as overly rigid, suggesting it might suppress creativity or individual expression. One parent characterized Confucianism as a form of ideological control aimed at the population. A recurring concern was the tension between Confucian values – such as filial piety and deference to authority – and contemporary ideals of personal autonomy. For instance, one respondent worried that children raised to be respectful and kind could become vulnerable in unsupportive environments. Another feared that excessive moral instruction could lead children to suppress their identities to accommodate others. Several also questioned the effectiveness of Confucian virtues – such as tolerance and self-restraint – in today’s competitive, individualistic, and materialistic society.

Other responses show that some parents believe Confucian values continue to hold relevance in contemporary educational contexts. The primary school years are a critical stage in the formation of a child’s worldview and moral framework. One parent reflected extensively on the role of Confucianism in this process, emphasizing its value in cultivating moral character and social responsibility. The Confucian ideal that “a benevolent person loves others” encourages compassion, empathy, and harmonious peer relationships. Principles such as “Do not impose on others what you do not desire for yourself” promote tolerance and mutual understanding in daily interactions. Furthermore, the concept of *li* (礼), or ritual propriety, is seen not merely as behavioural etiquette, but as a reflection of inner cultivation. Through learning respectful conduct, students develop filial piety at home and respectful relationships with teachers and peers at school, fostering harmony in both family and educational settings. Values such as honesty and trustworthiness are also central, guiding students to act with integrity in both academic and personal life. One parent believed that the Confucian ideal of the *junzi* (君子), or noble person, provides a moral exemplar, and that exposure to classics such as the *Analects* allows children to internalize the wisdom of ancient sages and strive for continuous self-improvement. In this parent’s view, Confucian thought – with its core values of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety)

– remains a vital force in character education and holistic development. However, the parent also expressed concern about the compatibility of these traditional values with modern society, where competition and individualism often outweigh moral cultivation. Those mixed responses highlight a broader societal dilemma: the growing tension between enduring traditional values and the ethos of modernity in contemporary China.

Notably, while the parents articulated a strong belief in Confucian relational ethics and holistic humanism, they did not recognize the presence of such values within mathematics education – despite their subtle integration into contemporary Chinese math textbooks.

The Danger of the Misuse Of Confucianism in Modern Education

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While Confucian ethics do not inherently endorse authoritarianism, the selective appropriation of certain doctrines – particularly the emphasis on social harmony over individuality – can be exploited to justify the suppression of personal autonomy under the guise of maintaining societal order. This tendency is not new: the ideologization of Confucianism began as early as 100 BCE, when it was institutionalized during the Han dynasty as the official state ideology. Integrated with Legalist governance methods, Confucianism became a tool of control, most notably through the imperial examination system, which emphasized memorization and orthodoxy rather than moral reflection. As Yao (2000) argues, this system diverged sharply from Confucius's original focus on self-cultivation and critical introspection, yet persisted as the main vehicle for transmitting Confucian doctrine until the early 20th century.

Confucianism has been selectively reintroduced into the national education system in contemporary China, with state-led initiatives promoting values such as filial piety, altruism, and social cohesion. This state-led promotion can highlight the positive aspects of Confucianism and positively influence students' moral development. However, it also raises concerns about the imposition of state doctrines on them. It is therefore crucial to distinguish Confucian philosophy – ethical discourses – from the state doctrine or dogmatic ethics, even if the boundary between the two is often blurred in practice.

As Sidorkin (2023) cautions, relationality itself – though potentially beneficial – can also foster uncritical social conformity. In Confucian relationism, ethical identity arises not from individual autonomy but from one's embeddedness

in preassigned social roles. Xunzi's maxim – “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son” (Xunzi, trans. Knoblock, 1994, pp. 30–32) – highlights this belief in fixed social positions as the foundation of order. Such role-based ethics, while promoting stability, may suppress individual agency and critical thought. As Cantero (2021) observes, social cohesion in Confucian societies is structurally produced through hierarchical relationships, rather than organically formed.

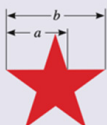
Misinterpretations of Confucian values can further entrench gerontocratic structures, in which the younger generations are expected to obey their elders unconditionally. In this distorted form, Confucianism is used to justify rigid hierarchies and discourage independent thought. Yet this view departs from the core of Confucian ethics, which emphasizes reciprocal respect, moral responsibility, and the pursuit of wisdom across generations. Moreover, the politicized application of Confucian ideals can give rise to uncritical patriotism, where loyalty to the state is prioritized over ethical deliberation. When Confucianism is leveraged to enforce obedience rather than encourage moral reasoning, it risks cultivating a conformist culture that suppresses dissent and stifles the pluralism essential to a healthy society. One math problem in the Chinese textbooks presents a political symbol, a “red star”.

 你知道吗?

黄金比

你听说过“黄金比”吗?

把一条线段分成两部分,当较短部分与较长部分长度之比等于较长部分与整体长度之比时,我们把这个比称为黄金比(约为0.618:1)。当一个物体的两个部分长度的比大致符合黄金比时,常常给人优美的视觉感受,所以,人们设计许多物品时都会考虑黄金比这一因素。



$a : b \approx 0.618 : 1$

上图中的五角星内还有其他线段长度的比符合黄金比吗?
请你收集一些有关黄金比的信息与同学交流。

Translation: The Golden Ratio: Have you heard of the golden ratio? If a line segment is divided into two parts in such a way that the ratio of the shorter part to the longer part is equal to the ratio of the longer part to the whole segment, this ratio is called the golden ratio (approximately 0.618:1). When the lengths of two parts of an object conform to the golden ratio, it often gives people a sense of aesthetic beauty. Therefore, many objects in design consider the golden ratio as a key factor.

In this example, the red star is praised for aligning with the aesthetic ideal of the golden ratio, subtly reinforcing its symbolic connection to national identity and ideological legitimacy. By associating a politically charged symbol with a universally admired mathematical concept, the textbook elevates the red star from a political emblem to an object of aesthetic and scientific validation. This integration of mathematical aesthetics and national symbolism deepens students' emotional and ideological engagement, linking mathematics learning with patriotic sentiment.

Yet this blending of ideological or humanistic content into mathematics instruction has sparked criticism. While proponents argue that such integration fosters holistic humanistic education (全人教育) and develops students' problem-solving abilities, detractors contend it imposes unnecessary cognitive burdens. A notable controversy arose in December 2024 with the *Shenzhen Nanshan Exam Case*, which became a national flashpoint. Critics questioned the excessive reading load in a primary school math exam, asking, "Why does a math test require so much reading?" This debate reflects a broader tension between the goals of cultivating moral and intellectual development and ensuring accessibility and clarity in math instruction. Still, advocates maintain that confronting complex, real-world scenarios – as opposed to solving decontextualized algorithmic problems – is essential for developing genuine problem-solving skills (Zhang, 2025).

Neoliberal Individualism in the American Mathematics Education

As illustrated by the contrasting examples above, the math problems found in Chinese textbooks often reflect broader societal themes and human relations, while the math problems in US textbooks tend to feature narratives that revolve around individuals engaged in independent activities. This distinction highlights the differing educational philosophies and cultural perspectives embedded within math instruction in the two countries.

As Rošker (2023) notes, the notion of individuals as equal citizens – a foundational idea of free society – was already established in ancient Greek political thought. Historically, individualism was classified into three stages – developmental individualism, meritocratic individualism, and moral individualism – as set out in "A Sociological Critique of Individualism in Education" (Hargreaves, 1980). In this, Hargreaves examines how these forms of individualism manifest within educational contexts. With individualism at the centre,

education is not primarily concerned with creating a certain kind of society, but instead its primary duty is the promotion of the educated individual. Hargreaves further warned that excessive individualism might erode the collective ethos necessary for educational flourishing.

The early 21st century saw the global spread of neoliberalism, a market-centred ideology emphasizing privatization, economic rationality, and individual responsibility. In education, this has led to the reconfiguration of students as entrepreneurial agents rather than civic participants. As Wilson (2017) explains, neoliberalism reframes learners as competitive market actors. Rosemont (2015) similarly critiques this anthropological shift, observing that the modern self is conceived as atomistic and self-sufficient – a perspective embedded in much of American educational practice. Within this paradigm, the individual is evaluated through economic performance, reduced to what Ong (2006) calls the “neoliberal subject” – a self-managing, efficiency-driven *homo economicus*. Stephen Ball (2012) describes this process as constructing the “entrepreneurial self”, where *homo sapiens* becomes *homo calculus*. The US math series *Eureka Math* exemplifies these values. Word problems often feature individuals in competitive or entrepreneurial contexts – buying, selling, saving, or optimizing outcomes – thus reinforcing the logics of individualism and market reasoning. Baker et al. (2010) show that across the 20th century, US math education increasingly emphasized cognitive independence, and Hoffman (2000) notes that this focus begins in early childhood. Mathematical literacy, in this view, becomes a tool not just for calculation, but for developing traits such as self-reliance, autonomy, and personal choice.

To better understand how neoliberal individualism is situated in daily education, I conducted two interviews with US elementary school math teachers. The first was with a Grade 3 math teacher at a STEM-oriented private school in the US. STEM, an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, has gained considerable prominence in K–12 education over the past decade. Several private institutions have been established with a specific emphasis on STEM education, often strategically marketed to families employed in the technology sector. According to the teacher, the school caters to families in the finance and tech industries and emphasizes early numeracy as a foundation for future academic competitiveness. “We focus on training children’s number sense” (Appendix C), she explained, linking math skills directly to career aspirations.

The second interview was with the head teacher of a language-immersion private school, who also teaches math. While she initially said she had not

considered the curriculum through a cultural lens, she acknowledged that family contexts and teacher figures are rarely present in math problems. Instead, scenarios emphasize peer relationships and diverse individual preferences. “Math instruction is straightforward – it’s about strategies, tools, and logic,” she noted, adding, “the focus is on how everyone has different preferences – personal choices” (Appendix C).

To gain insights from parents, I also distributed a 15-question survey to over 100 US elementary school parents. Their responses, analysed in a later section, further illuminate how neoliberal individualism shapes not only textbook content but broader attitudes toward mathematics education.

Parental Attitudes Toward Individualism in U.S. Elementary Education

Question	Strongly Agree / Support (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Q3: Children should learn to take full responsibility for their successes and failures at school.	29.63	52.78	13.89	7.41	0.93
Q4: Competition among students helps them perform better.	28.7	39.81	29.63	5.56	0.93
Q5: Schools should focus more on developing each child's unique talents and achievements than on group cooperation.	34.26	48.15	13.89	5.56	0.93
Q6: Parents should be able to choose schools based on performance rankings, even if it increases inequality.	28.7	40.74	15.74	12.04	3.7
Q7: In elementary education, self-reliance is more important than learning to work in groups.	16.67	34.26	28.7	20.37	3.7
Q8: Public education should focus on preparing children to compete in a global economy.	30.56	47.22	18.52	6.48	0.93
Q13: Support or oppose education as a competitive marketplace.	28.97	23.36	28.04	17.76	8.41
Q15: Math instruction should help children become independent problem-solvers rather than rely on collaboration.	24.49	46.94	21.43	7.14	1.02

Parental Attitudes Toward Individualism in U.S. Elementary Education

Question	Strongly Agree / Support (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Q3: Children should learn to take full responsibility for their successes and failures at school.	29.63	52.78	13.89	7.41	0.93
Q4: Competition among students helps them perform better.	28.7	39.81	29.63	5.56	0.93
Q5: Schools should focus more on developing each child's unique talents and achievements than on group cooperation.	34.26	48.15	13.89	5.56	0.93
Q6: Parents should be able to choose schools based on performance rankings, even if it increases inequality.	28.7	40.74	15.74	12.04	3.7
Q7: In elementary education, self-reliance is more important than learning to work in groups.	16.67	34.26	28.7	20.37	3.7
Q8: Public education should focus on preparing children to compete in a global economy.	30.56	47.22	18.52	6.48	0.93
Q13: Support or oppose education as a competitive marketplace.	28.97	23.36	28.04	17.76	8.41
Q15: Math instruction should help children become independent problem-solvers rather than rely on collaboration.	24.49	46.94	21.43	7.14	1.02

Parental attitudes in the US further illuminate the cultural foundations of neoliberal individualism in elementary mathematics education. The survey results reveal strong support for values such as personal responsibility (Q3: 82.41% agree or strongly agree), competition (Q4: 68.51%), and individualized achievement over group cooperation (Q5: 82.41%). These attitudes resonate with the ideological underpinnings of *Eureka Math*, a curriculum known for embedding neoliberal values such as self-reliance, efficiency, and market logic into its word problems and instructional design. For instance,

math tasks that revolve around consumer choice, budgeting, and entrepreneurial scenarios echo the priorities reflected in parental support for meritocracy and competition. A notable 69.44% of respondents also agreed with the statement that public education should prepare children to compete in a global economy (Q8), reinforcing the alignment between parental expectations and market-driven educational models. Moreover, while only 24.07% supported turning education into a competitive marketplace (Q13), the broader support for school choice (Q6: 69.44%) and independence over collaboration (Q7 and Q15) suggests a nuanced but prevalent acceptance of neoliberal logic. This constellation of beliefs not only validates the cultural embeddedness of neoliberal individualism in US math education, but also points to the potential challenges of introducing more relational, collaborative, or communitarian approaches, which may be perceived as undermining personal merit and accountability.

The Problems With Neoliberal Individualism in Modern Education

Drawing on insights from the two interviews with US mathematics teachers, the differentiation and marketing strategies of private schools illustrate the market-oriented logic characteristic of neoliberal education policy. As Stephen J. Ball (2003) argues, neoliberalism reconfigures education into a competitive marketplace where schools operate as businesses and parents as consumers. In this context, private schools strategically brand themselves to appeal to specific parental expectations, enabling families to “shop” for educational experiences that align with their aspirations for their children’s academic and professional futures, thus reinforces broader patterns of educational inequality, reproducing social stratification under the guise of choice and meritocracy. Andrew Hacker (2016), in *The Math Myth: And Other STEM Delusions*, critiques the emphasis on advanced mathematics in US education, arguing that it serves neoliberal goals by framing student success narrowly in terms of workforce readiness. Education thus becomes valued not for its intrinsic intellectual or ethical merits, but for its utility in producing economically competitive individuals.

In *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, Leary (2019) examines terms that relate to individualism within the context of contemporary capitalism. Notable keywords include entrepreneur, human capital, innovation, meritocracy and possessive individualism, valorize personal agency, competition, and self-investment, often at the expense of recognizing structural inequalities.

Indeed, US education has long been known for its basis on meritocracy, which suggest that the individual and their efforts are the sole determinants of success, potentially overlooking systemic inequalities. Moreover, an excessive focus on individual achievement denies to children those essentially collective experiences which are the necessary medium of such learning. Ball (2003) argued that:

we become blind to the fact that collective experiences in school are embryonic experiences of social solidarity; and because such experiences will sometimes threaten the rights of individuals, they are experiences in learning to recognize and to respect the rights of individual.

The effects of neoliberal individualism extend beyond the classroom. Edgar Morin observes a weakening of civic spirit, while Nancy Fraser (2016a) describes a broader erosion of social bonds – those intergenerational and communal ties that sustain families, neighbourhoods, and society at large. These forms of care and connection, both affective and material, constitute the “social glue” necessary for cooperation and collective well-being. Without them, the foundations of society – its economy, politics, and culture – begin to unravel.

A Pedagogy of Relations

As early as Aristotle, the ideal of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) was critically examined. (Aristotle, trans. 1999). He insisted that complete independence is an illusion, as humans are inherently dependent on one another, an idea which became the foundation for Western communitarianism. Charles Taylor’s essay “Atomism” (1991) also critiques the notion that individuals can be understood independently of their social contexts – a concept he attributes to certain strands of liberal thought. He argues that this perspective overlooks the fundamental role that communities play in shaping individual identities and values, and further emphasizes that identity and values are formed through relationships and communal affiliations, not in isolation.

Emmanuel Levinas deepens this relational view by asserting that ethics precedes ontology: before being thinking subjects, we are ethically responsible beings, summoned by the face of the Other (Levinas, 1969). For Levinas, subjectivity is defined not by autonomy, but by responsibility – being *for* the Other (Levinas, 1981). This radically opposes the liberal or neoliberal ideal of the self-contained, self-interested learner, and parallels Confucian notions of the relational self-shaped through family and society.

Within education, many US scholars and educators have increasingly warned against the atomizing effects of individualism, and have called for a renewed focus on relational pedagogies. Alexander M. Sidorkin, for instance, advocates a pedagogy of relation, arguing that learning is fundamentally social and cannot be reduced to knowledge transfer or efficiency metrics. As he notes, education cannot be optimized like transportation or communication, because it depends on human relationships. Sidorkin and Bingham (2010) summarize this view succinctly: “no education without relation.” Similarly, Gert Biesta (2010) has critiqued what he calls the “learnification” of education – the reduction of education to measurable outcomes, competencies, and individualized learning gains. In his view, such a framework neglects the *subjectification* function of education: the formation of individuals as ethical, relational beings who can exist with and for others in a democratic society. Biesta’s work resonates with the Levinasian and Confucian commitments to relational subjectivity, offering a robust alternative to the economic logic that dominates contemporary educational policy.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a growing convergence among philosophers and educators across traditions – Confucian, communitarian, phenomenological – all of whom resist the reduction of the learner to an isolated individual and instead emphasize the inherently social, ethical, and interdependent dimensions of human development. In contrast to neoliberal individualism, which frames the student as a self-maximizing unit of human capital, these thinkers collectively reimagine education as the cultivation of people in relationships – with others, with communities, and with society at large. Furthermore, rather than choosing between individualism and relationism, might there be a more integrative framework capable of transcending their shortcomings while preserving their strengths? This question leads us to the concept of *sublation*, a dialectical process that opens the way for reimagining education beyond entrenched binaries.

Sublating Confucian Relationism and Neoliberal Individualism

In the face of both unprecedented opportunities and profound challenges within contemporary global education, there is an urgent need to reconsider prevailing perspectives on the aims and practices of education. This moment calls for a paradigmatic shift – one that moves beyond binary oppositions and toward a more integrative and reflexive framework. Central to this transformation is the concept of *sublation*, drawn from the Hegelian

term *Aufhebung*, which entails the simultaneous negation and preservation of opposing ideas. In the educational context, sublation offers a productive pathway to transcend the limitations of both neoliberal individualism and Confucian relationism by critically integrating their respective strengths.

Neoliberal individualism emphasizes personal autonomy, self-determination, and responsibility. These values can cultivate a sense of agency, innovation, and diversity, as individuals are encouraged to pursue their own interests, develop independent thought, and contribute to society through entrepreneurial and creative endeavours. Moreover, this framework tends to support pluralism and tolerance, acknowledging the multiplicity of human experiences and promoting freedom of expression. However, when left unchecked, neoliberal individualism can foster social fragmentation, hyper-competitiveness, and a diminished sense of communal responsibility. Individuals may become isolated or instrumentalized, detached from meaningful social relationships and the broader ethical fabric of their communities. Conversely, Confucian relationism offers a relational and context-sensitive view of the self, grounded in the cultivation of virtues through social roles and interpersonal obligations. It emphasizes interconnectedness, moral responsibility, and the importance of harmonious social bonds. This perspective can serve as a counterbalance to the atomizing tendencies of individualism by promoting mutual care, solidarity, and collective flourishing. Yet Confucian relationism – particularly in its more rigid or hierarchical forms – can also risk reifying status-based norms, suppressing individual voice, and prioritizing conformity over personal development or dissent.

The task, then, is not to choose one framework over the other, but to pursue a sublation of the two: a dialectical synthesis in which the empowering aspects of individual autonomy are preserved alongside the ethical grounding and social coherence offered by relational models. Such a vision seeks to cultivate individuals who are free to develop unique identities and express independent thought, yet who are also deeply embedded in, and responsible to, their communities. In this model, personal freedom and communal solidarity are not seen as oppositional, but as mutually reinforcing. Indeed, the urgency of this integrative approach is underscored by today's growing public concern in Chinese society, where the uncritical convergence of neoliberal and Confucian logics has led to troubling social consequences. On the one hand, Confucian relational ethics continue to promote hierarchical obligations and social harmony, often at the cost of individual voice and critical agency. On the other hand, the increasing influence of neoliberal values introduces a market-driven ethos of self-interest, competition, and performativity. When

these paradigms intersect without thoughtful mediation, they can produce a cultural climate characterized by instrumentalized relationships, intensified pressure to perform, and widespread feelings of alienation and moral disorientation. As critics have noted, this uneasy synthesis neither fosters genuine community nor supports authentic individuality.

To sublate these two correctly, Rošker (2024) proposes a model of “critical relationism” that preserves the ethical substance of Confucian relationality while simultaneously integrating the emancipatory aspirations of modern humanist thought. She argues that the way forward is not a return to hierarchical collectivism, nor an uncritical embrace of neoliberal autonomy, but the construction of a new ethical paradigm – one that is dialogical, flexible, and rooted in mutual recognition. First and foremost, this requires the recognition that relationality and autonomy are not necessarily opposites but can coexist in dynamic tension when reframed through a relational ontology that affirms both personal dignity and social embeddedness.

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Building on Rošker’s concept of critical relationism, we may envision a model of elementary math education that affirms both the agency of the individual learner and the ethical significance of community. In such a framework, mathematical learning is not reduced to either personal utility or social obedience but is instead reframed as a process of ethical co-development. Students learn to reason independently while also engaging in cooperative problem-solving that emphasizes empathy, listening, and collective growth. Individual strategies are valued not for their novelty alone, but for their contribution to a shared understanding of mathematical concepts.

This model could involve classroom practices such as: pair and group work designed not only for efficiency but for cultivating mutual respect and diverse perspectives; mathematical storytelling that draws on both personal experiences and social narratives, integrating context with content; teacher facilitation that combines moral encouragement with intellectual challenge, respecting student agency while anchoring learning in shared values; and assessment strategies that balance individual mastery with collaborative competencies, recognizing that mathematical thinking often flourishes through dialogue and interdependence.

Such a sublation reframes math education not as a site of competition or conformity, but as a relational space where students learn to think clearly, act ethically, and exist meaningfully with others. Rather than positioning freedom and harmony in opposition, this model treats them as mutually constitutive elements of human flourishing. Children are thus not groomed

solely as future economic actors or dutiful citizens, but as relational agents – capable of independent reasoning, yet deeply aware of their interdependence with others and the ethical weight of their learning.

To apply this sublation method to the two textbooks I have been analysing, I am presenting a practical example by rewriting a word problem:

***Eureka Math* style:**

“A student wants to buy 3 notebooks that cost \$2 each. How much money does she need?”

(Focus: economic reasoning, individual calculation)

***Renjiaoban* style:**

“There are 6 students cleaning the classroom. If each group has 2 students, how many groups are there?”

(Focus: group roles, cooperation, classroom context)

Sublated version:

“A class wants to buy notebooks to donate to children in need. If they buy 3 packs of notebooks, each costing \$2, how much do they spend? How can they fairly divide the cost?”

(Focus: math as relational and ethical reasoning; combines individual computation with a social purpose)

In this way, the dialectical synthesis of Confucian relationism and neoliberal individualism holds promise for reimagining elementary school math education as a space not merely for skill acquisition and cognitive development, but for the cultivation of ethics and community building.

Overall, this comparative inquiry into US and Chinese elementary math education reveals how deeply educational practices are shaped by underlying cultural and philosophical paradigms – namely, Confucian relationism and neoliberal individualism. In China, the *Renjiao ban* textbooks exemplify a relationist framework rooted in Confucian ethics, where selfhood is cultivated through social roles, and mathematical problems are embedded in communal or familial contexts. In contrast, in the US, curricula such as *Eureka Math* reflect and reinforce a neoliberal ethos that privileges personal autonomy, market rationality, and competitive self-management. Survey data from American parents further affirm this orientation, highlighting a strong endorsement of meritocracy, individual responsibility, and global competitiveness. Yet neither model is without limitations. By analysing both curricular content and stakeholder attitudes, this study has argued for a reflexive and

integrative approach to math education – one that affirms the individual not as an atomized unit, but as a socially embedded and ethically responsible being. In doing so, it points toward a future of education that resists the false binary between collectivist conformity and individualist self-interest, instead seeking to nurture both meaningful community and authentic individuality in the elementary classroom and beyond.

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Appendix: interview transcription

Transcript

老师A

(A Chinese-American math teacher teaching Grade 3 in New York)

我：今天就是想跟您从文化角度聊聊美国的小学数学教育

A：老师要读题目，是language habit，不是纯粹的 $1+1$ 等于2，

我：了解

A：有很多逻辑，自己的model在里面，特别有名的就是Bar model，通过bar model来解决代数的问题，其实小学就涉及到很多鸡兔同笼。不过我很少从文化的角度看这个。一般题目就是有个小朋友的名字，然后小朋友

我：你们教的数学题里面有提到family之类的吗？

A：很少，很少，就很多是学校方面的。比如这个老师有什么。我最近能想到的题目，老师给某某贺卡。还有就是长短/高矮/大小，两个人会比身高，也就限于这两个人是朋友。基本上出现比较多的是朋友关系。很少有家庭。基本上也尽量include diversity，图片里会有不同孩子出现，比如有时会有不同肤色，不同发型，卷发的直发的。尽量在形象上include diversity。不像中国那样。

我：对，可能中国小朋友都是一样的衣服一样的发型。

A：美国文化的影响。数学更注重strategy，并没有发很长时间在图片上。Singapore math有个主轴心的strategy就是CPA，从concrete material到picture，然后到abstract，concrete material一般就是拿来数数的，图片上是一些常见的动物，常见的场景，最后它的transition就是变成一些圆形或者方形，最后想要达到的目的就是abstract。

我：了解。

A：然后还有最多的就是比赛了。比如：这个人，我骑自行车跑完一圈需要多少时间，另外一个人走路走完同样的路，需要多少时间。它也没有说谁是更好的。还是比较客观在比较数学的东西。没有一个单一的成功形象。还是侧重于每个人喜欢的东西不一样。每个人选择的方法不一样。很多personal choices。

我：我有注意到美国数学教科书上面也经常提到marketplace，您在教课过程中会经常举这类例子吗？

A：我教高年级Algebra的时候会经常遇到compound interest的题，比如利

率是怎么收的。但它也不是真的用生活中银行现在的利率，毕竟每年都会变，但它就是选的2%。

我：那家长有没有什么expectation，比如小孩子数学要学成怎么样。

A：这要看每个学校的群体哈。比如我们学校挺注重数学要考得好，他们很多家长都会送孩子去数学的课后班。比如Kumon,我在arts of problem solving的afterschool有工作，那里有很多的印度小孩和中国小孩。有的是父母想要孩子数学好，还有的是小朋友数学是真的好，真的感兴趣，想去做更challenging的problem。父母也希望老师们的differentiation更好。家长比较单一的衡量方式就是考试考得好不好。

我：他们考试一般是统一的还是怎样的？

A：不一样的学校不同，比如公校会有公校考试，纽约和新泽西都有不同的公校考试。然后私校的话是不同的选择，他们不用考公校的州考。他们自己选择私校的考试。像我们学校考ERB。

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我：那孩子们对考试什么态度？

A：考试肯定还是有压力。虽然不比中国的考试。但是孩子们都知道爸爸妈妈会看。

我：那孩子们会从personal growth的角度去想自己的学习吗？

A：高年级的小朋友会想。我之前教7年级8年级的时候小朋友都清楚得很。因为这个分数决定了老师给我打的分数，决定我去什么样的高中。班上有个小朋友打算申请出去，申请去更好的私校，那成绩必须好。所以需要申请的小朋友自己对personal growth会更有概念。

我：那在您看来，有哪些skill或者qualities是math education需要focus on的？

A：就是strategy的运用，用什么方法能更快更好解决问题。

我：哦，就是找optimal的solution。

A：我觉得还有一个是，数学压迫培养小朋友的growth mindset。就是遇到难的问题，没有关系，再试一试。这种mindset是值得提倡的。我们有个小朋友数学很好，但他认为是自己聪明。但后面很多很难的题目都是需要努力的。

我：嗯嗯。

A：还有就是collaboration。你怎么去跟人解释一些问题，怎么去合作，怎么去别人身上学习。

我：如果您要redesign数学教育，您会想怎么做？

A：我其实对芬兰的教育还蛮感兴趣的。人家不是自然教育和森林教育，没有考试。没有考试就没有压力。当然有些孩子有压力才有动力。或者curriculum之外数学相关的游戏可以explore。但学校每天排课也很有限。

我：学校数学课是一天一次吗。

A：对，五十分钟。我听说中国的学校是不是小学就有按数学成绩分班？

我：不确定，但是有那种奥数班。

Translation:

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I: Today I'd like to talk with you about American elementary math education from a cultural perspective.

A: Teachers here have to *read* the questions – it's a language habit, not just "1 + 1 = 2".

I: I see.

A: There's a lot of logic involved – students build their own *models*. One very famous one is the *bar model*. Through the bar model, we solve algebraic problems; actually, even in elementary school, there's already the idea of "chickens and rabbits in one cage". But honestly, I seldom think about it from a cultural angle. Usually the questions just feature a kid's name, and then the kid does something.

I: Do the math problems you teach ever mention family life?

A: Very rarely – mostly school related. For example, something about a teacher giving someone a greeting card. Or questions about length, height, size – two kids compare their heights, and that's about it. At most they're *friends*, not family. What appears most often is friendship. Hardly ever family. And the textbooks try to include *diversity*: pictures show different kids – different skin tones, hairstyles, curly or straight hair. They try to include diversity visually. It's not like in China.

I: Right, in China the kids usually all look the same – same clothes, same hairstyle.

A: Exactly. That's cultural influence. In the US, math focuses more on *strategy*; not much time is spent on the pictures themselves. Singapore Math has a core strategy called CPA – from *Concrete* materials to *Pictorial* representation, and then to *Abstract*. Concrete materials are counting blocks or objects;

the pictures show familiar animals or scenes; then the transition uses circles or squares; finally the goal is abstract thinking.

I: Got it.

A: And there are lots of *comparison* problems. For instance: one person rides a bike around a track – how long does it take? Another person walks – how long does that take? The problem never says who's better – it's objective, comparing mathematical quantities. There's no single image of success. It focuses more on everyone's personal choices – different people like different things, choose different methods.

I: I've noticed US textbooks often mention the *marketplace*. Do you use examples like that when teaching?

A: When I teach upper-grade algebra, we often have compound-interest problems – how interest is calculated. But it's not real bank data – since rates change yearly – so they just use 2% as an example.

I: Do parents have certain expectations for their kids' math learning?

A: That depends on the school community. At my school, math scores matter; many parents send kids to after-school math programs like *Kumon*. I also work at *Art of Problem Solving* after school. There are many Indian and Chinese kids there. Some go because their parents want them to excel in math; others genuinely love math and want more challenging problems. Parents hope teachers can do better *differentiation*. But most parents still measure success simply by test scores.

I: Are the tests standardized?

A: It varies. Public schools have their own state tests – New York's and New Jersey's are different. Private schools choose their own exams; they don't take state tests. At our school we use the ERB's.

I: What's the kids' attitude toward testing?

A: There's pressure, of course – not like in China, but still. Kids know their parents will check the scores.

I: Do they think about their learning in terms of personal growth?

A: The older ones do. When I taught seventh and eighth grade they understood clearly – scores determine the grade teachers give them, which high school they can attend. One student wanted to apply to a better private school, so grades mattered. Those who have to apply somewhere else are more aware of *personal growth*.

I: What skills or qualities should math education focus on, in your view?

A: Using *strategies* – finding better, faster ways to solve problems.

I: So, finding the optimal solution.

A: Yes. And also cultivating a *growth mindset*. When facing a hard problem, it's okay – try again. That mindset is valuable. We have a student who's very good at math, but he used to think he was just "smart". Later, harder problems taught him that effort matters.

I: Mm-hmm.

A: Another thing is *collaboration* – how to explain your reasoning to others, how to work together, how to learn from others.

216 **I:** If you could redesign math education, what would you do?

A: I'm quite interested in Finland's education – nature-based, forest education, no exams. Without exams there's no pressure – though some pressure can motivate. Maybe more math-related games outside the curriculum. But school scheduling is tight.

I: So math class is once a day?

A: Yes, 50 minutes. I heard Chinese schools stream students by math scores even in elementary school?

I: I'm not sure, but there are "Olympiad Math" classes.

Teacher B

(An American math teacher teaching Grade 3 at a private school in New Jersey)

I: What do you think is the core strategy in American math teaching?

B: We use lots of multimedia – songs, nursery rhymes – like *Friends of 10*, *Friends of 20*, "One plus one equals two", up to "12 plus 20". Through multi-sensory methods kids grasp basic facts, and then build upward. For example, before doing $8 + 9$, they've learned the songs and can *decompose* numbers naturally. By decomposing, they internalize mathematical thinking.

They learn *number bonds* visually – like a chart: a number on top, two branches below showing the parts it's made of. For instance, 6 can be $1 + 5$. With this visual help, they understand a number can split into two numbers – the *core* concept. Then they use number bonds and facts to explain $8 + 9$ – they'll

think, “ $1 + 9 = 10$; I already know that by heart. If I take 1 from 8, I have 7 left.” They see number patterns.

We also use *number charts* – the 100-chart or 120-chart – ten numbers per row, so you can see digit patterns vertically. After mastering these patterns, they can apply them to larger numbers – knowing $10 + 8$ is easier than $8 + 9$. It’s all about strategy – training the mind to simplify computation.

I: Interesting.

B: It’s really about thinking – how to make reasoning efficient. But it doesn’t apply to all kids. Some simply don’t have strong number sense – maybe they didn’t get enough early exposure.

I: Then I must be one of those whose number sense wasn’t well developed! But I get what you mean – each number has its own character.

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B: Exactly, and relationships between numbers, too.

I: That does feel different from China’s math education, which now emphasizes reading comprehension more than abstraction.

B: True, though that may be specific to my current school. My previous school wasn’t so STEM-focused – it was a traditional American private school. They also emphasized *Whole-Child Education*, interdisciplinary learning. For example, when teaching fractions I’d bring in moral values. My current school is moving in that direction too – telling parents we want to connect math to real life. You can’t teach ratio and proportion apart from life. It’s also very problem-solving oriented.

I: Are the students here specially selected – more motivated?

B: Yes, many have parents with engineering backgrounds.

I: Do they say they want to follow their parents into engineering?

B: I haven’t really discussed that, but I’ve noticed some compare themselves to peers and feel they’re “not good at math”. If they were in a regular public school, they might be average or above average, but here they feel negative – anxious, always saying “I’m so dumb”. Somehow, human society treats STEM as the measure of intelligence. If you’re good at math or science, you’re *smart*; if you’re good at English – okay, that’s fine. At this age they already admire kids who are quick with numbers. No one says, “Wow, you read three books today!”

I: In China, reading is considered a good thing. But I can imagine your school emphasizes STEM.

B: Right. Being great at humanities or history is considered *brilliant*, but not *smart*.

I: Yes, people think those who study humanities are *knowledgeable*, not *smart*. It's a fascinating value system. Nowadays *smart* has become such a prized quality. I remember "smart" originally came from Old English, meaning "to sting," not a positive word. For example, when you praise your students, do you call them *smart*?

B: No, never. We praise what they *do*, not what they *are*. We don't use *smart* with parents either – we're very careful.

I: But the kids themselves talk about who's smart.

B: Yes, it's this strange social norm.

I: Exactly – a product of modern society. Do they think they're smarter than other kids because they're in a STEM-focused school?

B: I haven't seen them interact with kids from other schools.

I: The textbook you showed me today is really interesting. Do the kids like it?

B: They love it!

I: So most of them are motivated. Are there any current education policies that affect you?

B: We're a private school, so not much. I'm not sure about public schools.

I: Do you notice students comparing themselves to each other?

B: We're very cautious about that. No comparisons. Even when grading, we tell them, "Keep it to yourself". They're curious, want to see classmates' work, but I say, "Everyone's at a different place – it's fine".

I: In China, rewards and punishments are very clear.

B: Here every child has something worth rewarding – we give stickers. It's *process-driven*, not *result-driven*.

I: Are there still rankings in China?

B: I'm not sure – I've heard there are.

老师C

(A Chinese math teacher teaching Grade 6 in Hubei)

我：老师好，很高兴能有机会采访您。想了解下现在国内小学数学现状。我看过现在的教科书

C：你看的是人教版的？

我：对的对的，人教版三年级和六年级的。老师您是教三年级的对吧？

C：是的。

我：我看这个教科书最大的感受就是小学生的数学题特别重视生活中的例子。

C：那肯定。结合生活经验，渐渐从易到难，学习要源于生活回归生活，循序渐进，这都是我们中国传统。孩子们在摸索人类生活的过程中，自然会接触到数量、形状、时间这些概念。比如他们分糖果、量水、比较高矮——这些都是数学的最初体验。

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我：所以您觉得学习顺序也很重要？

C：对，循序渐进特别关键。我们常说“从易到难”，就是让孩子们先感受到生活里的数学，再慢慢过渡到抽象的计算，比如小数到分数再到方程。只有这样，知识才能真正被吸收，而不是死记硬背。

我：所以数学不仅仅是数学教育，也可以说是道德教育的部分？

C：恩。。你这么说的话确实。其实插图啊，题目的题干啊，都是涉及到很多道德问题的。比如像之前我们出过的毒教材问题。

我：哦哦，我听说过。那个挺离谱的。

C：之前的数学教材的插图大家觉得有些画面太偏向“外国化”的审美，淡化了民族特色，所以这些年也做了些调整。

我：这种变化对孩子的影响大吗？

C：应该是有影响的。比如现在的数学教材会特别提到中国古代的数学成就——祖冲之、秦九韶、孙子算法，还有《九章算术》，中国算经这些。孩子们读到这些，会觉得“哦，原来中国古代也这么厉害”，这对增强民族自信很有帮助。

我：您觉得孩子们真的因此更感兴趣了吗？

C：是的，有的。比如他们读到祖冲之能在没有计算器的年代算出圆周率 $3.1415926 \sim 3.1415927$ ，就特别震撼。这种情感连接比单纯背公式更有效。

我：我也采访了一些美国的数学老师，他们跟我说美国小学数学特别注重数感，就是对数字的感觉。但中国小学数学是不是不一样？

C: 怎么说呢，公式很重要。我印象中国外就是把公式直接拿过来用，我们这边重视公式是怎么推理出来的。当然记忆力也很重要。

我：哦。我感觉公式的演算推理两边都是重视的。

C: 然后现在国内啊，整个教育体制就是公平公正的问题比较大。教育分流。30%的人之后要去中专，参加技能高考，所以学生们的压力很大。

我：感觉这个政策的初衷是为了减少压力？就是让大家发挥所长，不要挤在同一个赛道？

C: 但这让家长很焦虑，觉得上升空间被阻断了。一旦孩子只能上职业学校的话。

我：那这个对于数学教育上，孩子们学习的压力更大了吗？

C: 当然，数学一直是占比最大的之一。

Translation:

I: Hello, it's great to interview you. I'd like to understand the current state of elementary math education in China. I've read some textbooks –

C: From the People's Education Press (PEP)?

I: Yes, the PEP Grade 3 and Grade 6 books. You teach third grade, right?

C: That's right.

I: My biggest impression is that the problems rely heavily on everyday life examples.

C: Of course. We combine with life experience – step by step, from easy to hard. Learning should come from life and return to life – that's our tradition. As children explore human life, they naturally encounter quantity, shape, and time. Dividing candies, measuring water, comparing heights – those are the beginnings of math.

I: So learning sequence is important?

C: Very. We always say “from easy to difficult”. Let children feel math in life first, then move to abstract ideas – decimals, fractions, equations. Only then can knowledge be absorbed instead of memorized.

I: So math isn't just math – it also includes moral education?

C: Hmm... yes, that's true. The illustrations and problem contexts often involve moral messages. For example, there was that “toxic textbook” issue.

I: Oh yes, I heard about that – it was pretty outrageous.

C: Some thought the illustrations looked too “Westernized”, weakening national character. So they made changes.

I: Did those changes affect students?

C: I think so. Now the textbooks highlight China’s ancient mathematical achievements – Zu Chongzhi, Qin Jiushao, Sunzi’s Algorithm, *The Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Arts*, and so on. When kids read that, they think, “Wow, the ancient Chinese were amazing!” It boosts their national pride.

I: Do they actually become more interested?

C: Yes. When they read that Zu Chongzhi calculated pi between 3.1415926 and 3.1415927 without a calculator, they’re astonished. That emotional connection is more effective than rote memorization.

I: American elementary math focuses a lot on number sense. Is it different in China?

C: Well, formulas are important here. In the US they just *use* formulas; we emphasize *how* they’re derived. And memory matters, too.

I: I see. Both sides value reasoning, but in different ways.

C: And in China the whole system faces fairness issues – education tracking. About 30% of students go to vocational schools for skill exams, so there’s pressure.

I: The policy aimed to reduce pressure, right – to let everyone follow their strengths?

C: Yes, but it makes parents anxious – they fear their child’s upward mobility is blocked if they’re tracked into a vocational school.

I: So math pressure increases?

C: Of course. Math is still one of the heaviest-weighted subjects.

老师D

(A Chinese math teacher teaching at Grade 6 in Hubei)

我：您从教几十年，怎么看数学教育的方向变化？

D：以前我们只重视计算，现在强调思维过程，也强调做人。这其实就是从“知识中心”走向以人为本。教育不只是训练解题，更是让孩

子学会如何思考。

我：但听说现在阅读材料越来越多？

D:对，考试题里阅读量确实比以前大很多。数学题已经不仅仅是算式，还有阅读理解、情境分析。比如一个题可能引用古代的“孙子算法”，或者讲“嫦娥奔月”“神舟十号”的故事，再带出一个数学模型。这种“故事化题目”，其实让孩子觉得数学离生活更近，也强化了民族自信。

我：所以民族叙事进入了数学课本？

D:对。比如学扇形面积的时候，书上会写祖冲之 1500 年前就算出圆周率的近似值，还会顺带讲中国的航天成就。

我：这会不会同时带入道德或价值教育？

D:那肯定有。这也是现在强调的“全人教育”的一部分。

我：您能说说什么是“全人教育”吗？

D：就是一种理念。成为一个完整的人，而不是掌握某一个技能。比如数学里强调观察、猜想、验证，不只是学技巧，更是培养孩子的思维习惯、审美感、耐心和自信。你看，有的孩子做题很快，但不沉稳；我们要的不是会算的机器，而是能用数学思考世界的人。

我：你觉得这种方法对学生的思维方式有什么影响？

D:我觉得它塑造了学生的“思辨性”。他们学会类比、归纳，也更容易发现美——比如对称、比例、秩序这些。数学中的美学渗透，其实是培养一种更高层次的感受力。你看，讲轴对称时我们会提中国建筑、讲地球表面“三山六水一分田”，孩子们就能在数字中看到世界的形象。

我：但我有看到相关的报道就是说，现在阅读内容变多了，数学考的不再是数学而是语文了，这会不会对一些本来数学好，语文能力较差的孩子造成困扰？

D：这确实是一个问题，也是这些语文能力较差的孩子需要面对的挑战，出发点是好的，是要让这些孩子把关注点不仅仅是放在数字上，而是知识、语言、情感、文化都连在一起。孩子能通过学数学认识公平、效率、秩序、美感。

我：嗯嗯，这挺好的。

Translation:

I: You've taught for decades – how do you see the direction of math education changing?

D: In the past we focused only on calculation; now we emphasize thinking processes – and character building. It's a shift from knowledge-centred to human-centred education. It's not just training problem-solvers, but teaching kids how to think.

I: I heard reading materials have increased a lot?

D: Yes, exam questions now have much more text. Math problems are no longer just equations but also reading comprehension and contextual analysis. Some refer to the ancient Sunzi's Algorithm, or stories like "Chang'e Flying to the Moon" or "Shenzhou 10", then ask students to build models. These story-based problems make math feel closer to life and strengthen national pride.

I: So national narratives enter math textbooks?

D: Exactly. When learning the area of a sector, the book might mention that Zu Chongzhi calculated pi 1,500 years ago and connect it to China's aerospace achievements.

I: Does that also bring in moral or value education?

D: Definitely. That's part of what we call *Holistic Education*.

I: Could you explain what "holistic education" means?

D: It's a philosophy – educating a *whole person* rather than just a skill. In math, when we stress observing, conjecturing, verifying, we're not just teaching technique but cultivating habits of thought, aesthetics, patience, and confidence. Some kids solve quickly but lack steadiness; we don't want machines that calculate – we want people who use math to think about the world.

I: How does this approach affect students' thinking?

D: It develops *critical reasoning*. They learn analogy and induction and start to see beauty – in symmetry, proportion, order. Aesthetics in math cultivates a higher sensitivity. For example, when teaching symmetry we show Chinese architecture; when discussing Earth's surface, we mention the saying "three parts mountain, six parts water, one part farmland". They start to see the world through numbers.

I: But I've seen reports saying that with all this reading, math exams are no longer about math but about language. Could that trouble students who are strong in math but weak in language?

D: That's indeed an issue, and it's a challenge those students must face. The original intent is good – to help them focus not only on numbers but on knowledge, language, emotion, and culture all together. Through learning math, children can also understand fairness, efficiency, order, and beauty.

I: That's wonderful.

Summary

The Scholar's Compass: Confucian Ideals and Education in a Global Context is a collected volume that critically reconsiders Confucian models of education in light of global educational crises and the search for alternatives to dominant neoliberal paradigms. Its central argument is that Confucian pedagogy – often misinterpreted as hierarchical and authoritarian – offers rich and nuanced approaches to moral cultivation, dialogical learning, and relational autonomy, which are increasingly relevant in today's world.

The book is structured in two major parts: the first focuses on theoretical reflections on classical and regional Confucian educational thought, while the second examines its contemporary practical implications. Together, the contributions cover a wide geographical and disciplinary range, from ancient Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese sources, to modern debates on social knowledge and education in a humanistic spirit. The book concludes with an interesting chapter which includes a transcultural textbook analysis, pointing to alternative models of pedagogy based upon certain elements of Confucian ethics.

Since Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), critical and autonomous thinking has been upheld as the cornerstone of progressive education. Yet under neoliberalism, even this ideal has been turned into a commodity. Against this backdrop, the book highlights Confucian models of education as offering important alternatives.

Confucian pedagogy, far from being a mere doctrine of obedience, emphasizes reciprocal responsibility, moral cultivation, and relational autonomy. It is grounded in dialogical forms of teaching, where the teacher guides students through questions, analogies, and classical references, rather than through authoritative lectures. Education, in this view, is not limited to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical skills but represents a lifelong process of becoming fully human and developing one's own humaneness (*ren* 仁). The volume challenges widespread prejudices about Confucianism by showing how its ideals, originally rooted in complementarity and responsibility, can enrich contemporary debates on global education.

By bringing together diverse perspectives, *The Scholar's Compass* highlights the continuing relevance of Confucian education in a globalized world. The volume shows that Confucian models of learning are not relics of a rigid past, but dynamic frameworks that emphasize relational autonomy, ethical responsibility, and lifelong cultivation. These models contrast sharply with neoliberal educational policies that prioritize efficiency, measurable outcomes, and marketability.

Instead of mourning the decline of humanistic learning, the book proposes Confucianism as a resource for rethinking what it means to educate human beings. Confucian pedagogy underscores that education is not only about professional expertise but also about cultivating humane, reflective, and responsible individuals who live meaningfully within communities. In today's world, where different traditions increasingly interact, this Confucian heritage can be combined, synthesized, and enriched through transcultural exchange.

In sum, the volume advocates for a pluralistic and ethically grounded vision of education. It reclaims Confucian ideals of ritual, relationality, and humaneness as resources for addressing contemporary crises in education and offers a transcultural framework for developing new paradigms that integrate critical reflection, moral cultivation, and global responsibility.

Téa Sernelj

Povzetek

Pričujoča knjiga je zbornik, ki nudi kritičen razmislek o konfucijanskih modelih vzgoje in izobraževanja v luči globalnih izobraževalnih kriz ter išče alternative prevladujočim neoliberalnim paradigmam. Osrednje izhodišče knjige je najti v predpostavki, po kateri nam lahko konfucijanska pedagogika, ki je pogosto napačno razumljena kot hierarhična in avtoritarna, nudi zanimive in socialno senzibilne pristope k moralni vzgoji, dialoškemu učenju in relacijski avtonomiji, pristope torej, ki so v sodobnem svetu vse bolj aktualni.

Knjiga je razdeljena na dva glavna dela: prvi se osredotoča na teoretske razmisleke o klasični in regionalni konfucijanski vzgojno-izobraževalni misli, drugi pa obravnava njene sodobne praktične implikacije. Skupaj ti prispevki zaobjemajo širok geografski in disciplinarni razpon, ki sega od starodavnih kitajskih, japonskih in vietnamskih virov pa vse do sodobnih razprav o družbenem vedenju in humanističnih iztočnicah izobraževanja. Zbornik se zaključi z zanimivo transkulturno analizo učbenikov.

Od Kantovega spisa *Kaj je razsvetljenstvo?* je bilo kritično in avtonomno mišljenje razumljeno kot temelj naprednega izobraževanja. Vendar je bilo to idealno načelo pod neoliberalizmom spremenjeno v blago. Na tem ozadju knjiga izpostavlja konfucijanske modele izobraževanja kot pomembne alternative.

Daleč od tega, da bi bila zgolj doktrina poslušnosti, poudarja konfucijanska pedagogika vzajemno odgovornost, moralno kultivacijo in relacijsko

avtonomijo. Utemeljena je na dialoških oblikah poučevanja, pri katerih učitelj ali učiteljica ne izvaja avtoritarnih frontalnih predavanj, temveč učence in učenke na interaktiven način vodi skozi vprašanja, analogije in razlage klasičnih referenc. Izobraževanje v tem pogledu ni omejeno na pridobivanje teoretskega znanja in praktičnih veščin, temveč predstavlja vseživljenjski proces kultivacije in zorenja, ki se manifestira v vrednoti (so)človečnosti (*ren* 仁).

Zbornik izpodbija razširjene predsodke o konfucijanstvu, saj pokaže, kako lahko njegovi ideali, ki izvirajo iz občutka vzajemne odgovornosti, obogatijo sodobne razprave o globalnem izobraževanju.

Z združevanjem raznolikih perspektiv zbornik izpostavi tiste elemente konfucijanske vzgoje, ki so v globaliziranem svetu lahko trajno relevantni. Knjiga pokaže, da konfucijanski modeli učenja niso zgolj relikti toge preteklosti, temveč dinamični okviri, ki poudarjajo relacijsko avtonomijo, etično odgovornost in vseživljenjsko učenje. Ti modeli so v jasnem nasprotju z neoliberalnimi izobraževalnimi politikami, ki dajejo prednost učinkovitosti, merljivim rezultatom in tržnosti.

Namesto da bi obžalovala zaton humanističnega učenja, knjiga predlaga posodobljene elčemente konfucijanstva in konfucijanske pedagogike kot vir za ponovni razmislek o tem, kaj pomeni vzgoja človeka. Poudarja namreč, da izobraževanje ni le pridobivanje strokovnega znanja, temveč tudi poučevanje, ki vodi k izoblikovanju humanih, reflektivnih in odgovornih posameznikov, ki živijo v skupnostih, v kagterih so ljudje vzajemno inherentno povezani in s tem tudi osmišljeni. V današnjem svetu, kjer se različne tradicije vse bolj prepletajo, je to konfucijansko izročilo mogoče modernizirati, ga sintetizirati in bogatiti skozi transkulturno izmenjavo.

Zbornik, ki je pred vami, torej zagovarja pluralistično in etično utemeljeno vizijo izobraževanja. Ponovno oživlja konfucijanske ideale obrednosti, odnosnosti in človečnosti kot vire za soočanje s sodobnimi krizami v vzgoji ter ponuja transkulturni okvir za razvoj novih paradig, ki združujejo kritično refleksijo, etični razvoj in globalno odgovornost.

Téa Sernelj

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