
CONFUCIAN MORAL EDUCATION IN THE *TA HSUEH* AND THE *ANALECTS*

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ABSTRACT

Confucian philosophy has always considered education as a mechanism to improve the quality of life in society. The Confucian classic, *Ta Hsueh* and the *Analects* emphasize this pivotal role of education. The ethics of education and life in the family also has a deep impact on government and business enterprises. Each one plays assigned roles and lives by the rules that govern his or her station in social life. The ninth chapter of the *Ta Shueh* teaches that “correct deportment” can rectify a whole country. Projecting the ethics of the family to the social order and extending the ethos of particular cultural practices to the global community, however, poses certain problems. The scope of the latter is much more extensive than the family and broader than the cultural practices of particular nation states. When family relations are preferred over that of others, authoritarian political power will not be too far behind. This paper is an investigation of the nature and limits of Confucian educational philosophy and its influence on society against the backdrop of globalization.

Keywords: Confucian Ethics, Education, Filial Piety,

Confucian societies are known to put premium on education as a means of improving the quality of life of their citizens. The Confucian classic, *Ta Hsueh*¹, translated as *The Great Learning*, “the gate through which the beginning student enters into virtue,”² emphasized the pivotal role of education in maintaining social order during the pre-modern Chinese kingdom of warring states. It offered the following approach to the attainment of virtue:

The Ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons.

Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.”³

Although Confucius had to move from one town to another to teach his students, his lessons on the importance of education are ingrained even today among families and nations that have been influenced by Confucian culture. This article will focus on the texts from the Analects and the Ta Shueh because of their tremendous influence on China’s educational philosophy. They were among the most important texts that were required for civil servants to study before joining the Chinese government from ancient times until 1905.⁴

Filial Piety 孝

Education was imbibed through the family. Elders served as role models for the duties and obligations that its members eventually played in the larger context of society. Propriety (Li), the behavior

that defines proper relationships, was initially learned from the family. One's humanity (Ren) 仁, or lack of it, was traced back to one's family background. Fidelity to family life and traditions was therefore held to be almost sacred.

When Confucius was asked what filial piety was about, he answered: "It is not being disobedient." When he was asked a second time, he answered again: "Not being disobedient." When asked to clarify his answer, he said: "That parents, when alive, should be served according to propriety (Li); that when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed according to propriety." (Analects 2:5)

The proper way to relate to parents, however, is not only a matter of performing formal duties. Confucius said that supporting one's parents must be done with "reverence." He laments that "Filial piety nowadays means to be able to support one's parents. But we support dogs and horses. If there is no feeling of reverence, wherein lies the difference?" (Analects 2:7) This reverential attitude is practiced not only in relation to those who are alive but especially when they are dead. Shrines are devoted to the departed members of the family in Confucian homes to honor the ancestors for whom the living members owe their existence and status in life.

Sunyatsen, revered founder of Chinese nationalism, suggested that a national consensus can be achieved if only the four hundred major clans that constitute the Chinese nation can be organized to respond to pressing national problems.⁵Citing the Analects, sinologist Jinli He concurs: "It is believed that if we build up family feeling with the internalization of *xiao* (filial piety) and *di* (deference to elders), we will naturally transfer the same feeling to our big family—our nation, literally, a national family (*guojia* 國家) (Analects 1:2)

The Evolution of the Chinese Notion of Education: From Xiao 孝 to Jiao 教

Xiao 孝, the Chinese character for filial piety, evolved from the character for elder (lao) 老, depicted by a hunched human being with a walking stick. The walking stick was later replaced by a child 子 to show the support of the next generation to their elders and the authority of the latter over the former. This authoritarian relationship is confirmed in Section two of the first book of the Analects: “*It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of xiao 孝 (family reverence) and di 弟 (fraternal deference) to have a taste for defying authority.*” This authoritarianism is expressed in the superior location of the character of the elder above the inferior character of the child in the term Xiao 孝 (filial piety).

Jiao 教, the Chinese character for education, builds on this metaphor of kinship by illustrating the role of elders in rectification of errors committed by children. It is composed of two characters: that of a father holding a stick on the right side of an image of a child with two x marks above its head 教. The stick is aimed at the x marks located above the head of the child to emphasize that rectification is an important part of Confucian education. Ideally, rectification is on the level of ideas, directed against the thinking balloons located above the child’s head. It need not be reduced to corporal punishment as what actually happens during extreme and unfortunate circumstances.

The vertical relationship between elders and the younger generations is also practiced within the educational system. This authoritarianism can be also observed in the practices of daily life as in the case of the underlings of government and business bureaucrats who are expected to faithfully follow the commands of their superiors. The latter, in turn, are expected to take care of their wards as parents do to their children.

The application of fraternal correction to the realm of governance is evident in Confucius recommendation to “rectify names” when given the chance to render advise to the Ruler of Wei. He explained that:

“If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then ceremonies and music will not flourish. If ceremonies and music do not flourish, then punishment will not be just. If punishments are not just, then the people will not know how to move hand and foot. Therefore, the superior man will give only names that can be described in speech and say only what can be carried out in practice. With regard to his speech, the superior man does not take it lightly. That is all.” (*Analects* 13:3)

According to Confucius, the key to leadership lies in the rectification of the leader himself or herself. When Kang Tzu asked Confucius about government, he replied: “To govern (cheng) is to rectify (cheng). If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will dare not to be rectified?” (*Analects* 12:17)

Junzi 君子 (Moral Exemplars)

A more optimistic method of teaching within the Confucian tradition is by way of moral exemplars. Unlike the vertical arrangement of characters that subordinate the ideogram of the child 子 in the characters that constitute *Xiao* and *Jiao*, the image of the child is horizontally along with the ideogram of the gentleman or the *Junzi* 君. The latter is depicted by the character of a man wearing a hat who appears to be positioned in front of a table before the ideogram of a child who is presumably his follower or student.

Instruction, just like any other form of teaching, is initially achieved by imitation. The teacher shows how things are said and done and the student tries to follow the cues demonstrated by the former. The teacher leads the way to the learning process and points to the objects to be learned while the student makes the effort to follow and learn the lesson for himself or herself.

Repetition, or following the teacher is a necessary component of learning. At the extreme it becomes a form of rote memorization but it can also be acquired through actual performances of deeds such as role playing, the construction and reconstruction of learning environments that approximate the conditions of experience, or applying the lessons learned to real life situations. The first line of the *Analects* attests to the primacy of practice in the learning process: “Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practice from time to time what has been learned?” One of the disciples of Confucius quips in the *Analects* that “one of the three questions that he asks of himself daily is whether he has repeated again and again and practiced the instructions of my teacher.” (*Analects* 1.4)

Sagacity 哲 (zhe)

The acquisition of knowledge is not for its own sake but for the sake of practice. Knowledge is even measured in accordance with the norms of praxis. As the ideogram for sagacity shows, the image for the mouth is located below the images of a hand and a measuring scale, depicting the primacy of action over mere speeches. In the *Analects*, Confucius describes the superior human being as “He acts before he speaks and speaks according to his action” (*Analects* 2:13). He also observed that “The superior man wants to be slow in word but diligent in action.” (*Analects* 4:24)

The primacy of action over words is not only illustrated by the ideographic character of the Chinese language but also by the normative principle of the “rectification of names” cited above. Names must conform to the reality they represent and words must be depicted according to reality. Confucian ideals would appear to be tautological if a realistic interpretation of his philosophy is not taken into account. When Confucius, for example, was asked about governance, he replied: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister be a minister, the father be a father and the son be a son.” (*Analects* 12:11). Without any reference to the reality of action and the relationships of those who are engaged in the activity of being a father, son, ruler and minister, Confucius’ reply would seem

to be mere repetitions of meaningless syllables.

Li 禮

The virtue of propriety (Li) in Confucian ethics also becomes more intelligible within the governing principle of the rectification of names. The *Analects* teaches that leaders should “Lead them (the followers) with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (Li), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves aright.” (*Analects* 2:3) The exemplary behavior of leaders attracts followers especially when such behavior is contextualized within the concrete demands of social reality. To turn away from exemplary leaders puts the followers to shame because they are turning away not only from the leaders themselves but also from their own humanistic aspirations.

Propriety (Li), therefore, is not governed merely by the imposition of laws and their corresponding punishments but by the illustrious life of moral exemplars. In the *Analects*, “Confucius said: ‘Lead the people with governmental measure and regulate them with law and punishment, and they will avoid wrong doing but will have no sense of honor and shame.’” (*Analects* 2:3) Acting in accordance with propriety cultivates humanity in a more positive way while the enforcement of law and punishment deters and prevents humans from committing acts of transgression in deference from and fear of external sanctions.

Following moral exemplars (Junzi) and the sanctions imposed by elders (Lao) serve as complementary ways of inculcating virtue. The first teaches by example while the second teaches by means of rectification. Both methods require social mediation in the cultivation of virtue. For Confucians, being human is achieved within the context of fellow human beings.

Ren Ethics (仁)

The Chinese character for humanity is composed of two ideograms: a picture that depicts a human being (人) along with the number two (二) beside it. Being human is always in relation to at least another one.

Being related to fellow human beings is an essential component of what it means to be human.

As an ethical project, being humane is achieved by living and dealing with other humans in various ways: children are children in relation to parents and vice-versa. Siblings are siblings in relation to brothers or sisters. These relationships require propriety (li) such as filial piety in relation to elders and deference (di) in relation to siblings.

The sequence of the child's birth in the family has corresponding ranks, appellations, and entitlements that entail specific duties and responsibilities. These appellations and entitlements are extended to other relatives such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, cousins and in-laws.

This practice of extending conventional social mores accorded to family members finds their way to the government and business enterprises. Each one plays assigned roles and lives by the rules that govern his or her station in social life. The ninth chapter of the *Ta Shueh* teaches that "correct deportment" can rectify a whole country: "Because he served as a worthy example as a father, son, elder brother, younger brother, therefore the people imitated him. This is what is meant by the saying that the order of the state depends on the regulation of the family." (*Ta Shueh*, Chapter 9).

Projecting the ethics of the family to the social order and extending the ethos of particular cultural practices to the global community, however, pose serious threats to the dignity of the broader human community. The scope of the latter is much more extensive than the family and broader than the cultural practices of particular nation states. When family relations are preferred over that of others, vicious practices such as nepotism and political dynasties that abuse power and authority will not be too far behind. We have also seen how excessive nationalism produced vicious tyrants that vilified and exterminated foreigners and other who do not fit the procrustean beds of native sensibilities.

Self-cultivation 大學

To correct the excessive influence of the family and nationalism at the global level, the *Ta Sueh* makes a universal appeal for the inclusion of all human beings within the project of moral education:

“From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation. There is never a case when the root is in disorder and yet the branches are in order.”

The *Ta Shueh* explicitly states that virtue serves as the root or foundation of the social order (Chapter 10). All human endeavors and must therefore prioritize the cultivation of virtue in order to become successful. It concludes that “Therefore the ruler will first be watchful over his own virtue. If he has virtue, he will have the people with him. If he has the people with him, he will have the territory. If he has territory, he will have wealth. And if he has wealth, he will have its use.”

With respect to wealth, Confucius said that “A man of humanity develops his personality by means of wealth, while the inhumane person develops wealth at the sacrifice of his personality” (Chapter 10).

The cultivation of virtue, moreover, is governed by the “Principle of the Measuring Square,” an all-encompassing negative version of the “golden rule” which states that:

What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not show it in dealing with his inferiors; what he dislikes in those in front of him, let him not show it in preceding those who are behind; what he dislikes in those behind him, let him not show it in following those in front of him; what he dislikes in those on the right, let him not apply it to those on the left; and what he dislikes in those on the left, let him not apply it to those on the right. ⁷

The development of such precautionary measures imposes disciplinary measures on the behavior of moral agents. It presumes the possibility of retaliation for untoward acts if one is not careful in his or her dealings. This negative formulation of the golden rule is reiterated in the *Analects* 5:11: “What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them.”

To facilitate the cultivation of virtue, the *Ta Shueh* suggests that:

Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. (Chapter 1)

Chu Hsi, *Ta Shueh*'s commentator explained that “the intelligent mind of man is formed to know and there is not a single thing in which its principles do not inhere.” (Chapter 5) The task of education, therefore, is to grasp the principles that govern things and “to proceed from what knowledge he has of their principles, and investigate further until he reaches the limit.” It presupposes a realist theory of knowledge wherein the human mind is believed to be capable of comprehending reality as far as the knower is willing to know.

Willingness further requires “sincerity”, the virtue that must be cultivated if the mind is to be rectified and directed towards an adequate comprehension of reality. To achieve this end, the *Ta Hsueh* recommends that “the superior man will always be watchful over himself when alone” (Chapter 6). This watchfulness is directed towards self-deception, such as “when we hate a bad smell or love a beautiful color”. Previous experiences and habits could influence perceptions, mislead acts of understanding, and commit erroneous judgments.

Emotions, must be held in check. Chapter Seven of the *Ta Hsueh* warns that when one is affected by wrath, fear, fondness, worries and anxieties, the mind will not be correct. This is especially the case “When

the mind is not present, we look but we do not see, listen but do not hear, eat but do not know the taste of food.” One is reminded by the Mahayana Buddhists’ practice of “Mindfulness” wherein attentive exercises are practiced in order to become present to the experiences of the here and now. Prejudices, biases and current preoccupations will have to be set aside in order to focus and attend to the subject matter at hand. Chu Hsi remarks that these exercises are meant to explain the rectification of the mind and the cultivation of the personal life.

Chu Hsi’s commentaries highlight the mutual alliance of intellectual education and the development of moral virtues both as a goal and as a precondition of the act of knowing. He believes that “After exerting himself in this way (of investigating the nature of things) for a long time, he will one day achieve a wide and far ranging penetration. Then the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, the refined or the coarse, will be apprehended, and the mind, in its total substance and great functioning, will be perfectly intelligent.” (Chapter 5)

A rectified heart with sincere thoughts, however, is not enough to obtain knowledge. Personal and social sacrifices are made before the altar of learning. Other activities and opportunities are given up in favor of quietly sitting down in the pursuit of knowledge.

Studying under adverse psychological and social conditions might seem impossible. Awareness of such distractions through self-reflection, however, can lead to the setting aside of obstacles that block the attainment of true knowledge. The act of knowing therefore cultivates virtues in the same manner that virtues contribute to the attainment of knowledge.

Virtues and Governance

Confucian societies rely on the family to educate its members. Chapter 9 of the *Ta Hsueh* admits that “the superior man (ruler) without going beyond the family, can bring education into completion in the whole state. Filial piety is that with which one serves his ruler. Brotherly respect is that with which one serves his elders, and deep love is that with which one treats the multitude. The *Ta Shueh* notes that the “Announcement of

K'ang says: "When the individual families have become humane, then the whole country will be aroused toward humanity." (Chapter 9)

Reliance on virtuous individuals to govern entire social systems, however, restricts the privilege of governance to those who are born to the more advantageous positions in society. Families who have numerous members and those who have a relatively more advantageous access to resources will dominate weaker families. This consequently will breed social inequalities. The more advantaged can influence public policy in their favor and will breed practices of injustices that will require the intervention by the people or by the state in order to address problems of resentment and jealousy. It is therefore not surprising that modernist values such as equality and freedom erupted later on in revolutionary and reformist movements that rocked Chinese history.

The "principle of the measuring square," cited above, warns rulers about the possible vengeance that followers might inflict on them if they fail to abide by the "golden rule." Chapter 10 of the *Ta Hsueh* concludes that "Therefore, when wealth is gathered in the ruler's hand, the people will scatter away from him; and when wealth is scattered [among the people], they will gather around him." Equality and social justice, therefore must be kept as virtues of social institutions if the ruler is to maintain himself or herself in power.

The *Ta Shueh* also warns that "It is not easy to keep the 'Mandate of Heaven'" (Chapter 10). It warns that by "having the support of the people, they have their countries, and by losing the support of the people, they lose their countries. Therefore, the ruler will first be watchful over his own virtue." This admonition is consistent with the order of values in the *Analects*. When asked about his preferences in relation to food, armaments and confidence of the people, Confucius chose the latter because according to him, "no state can exist without the confidence of the people" (*Analects* 12:7). The will of the people is deemed to prevail even in the despotic regimes of Ancient China.

Concluding reflections

Confucian moral education teaches that virtues are cultivated through the family. The virtues of Xiao, Li and De are developed from within this social context. In the Ancient Greek City states or the *Polis*, the virtues of prudence, justice, courage and temperance were identified as cardinal virtues that guide the flourishing of its members. In the religious communities of the medieval period, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love were preached to promote religious devotions. In the modern world, scientific societies highly valued freedom, equality, and fraternity in the promotion of social progress. In our contemporary virtual communities, communicative competence, sincerity and truthfulness serve as the norm of social relations.

The influence of social contexts in the cultivation of virtues and the emergence of distinctive human values from different historical circumstances, however, need not limit the universal aspirations of humanity from within the specific contexts of cultural circles. The validity of these virtues and values can still be recognized, appropriated and applied to other social and historical circumstances since such circumstances are also possible experiences for other human beings.

The epistemology of moral beliefs demonstrated by Confucian ethics, such as the formation and openness of the mind to know, the investigation of the principles that govern the things that the mind comes into contact with and the act of proceeding to know from that which is already known towards the unknown (*Ta Hsueh*, Chapter 5) are also familiar to ethicists schooled in the traditions of Aristotle, St. Thomas, Kant, Max Scheler and Habermas. These methodological convergences exemplify the shared experiences of those who have thought deeply about the foundations of moral values and the applicability of moral principles to different social and personal circumstances. Human conditions will necessarily be different, but there are convergences among their aspirations that offer hope for the emergence of human solidarity, compassion and shared destiny.

ENDNOTES

¹ Translated as *The Great Learning* in Wing –tsit Chan, Ed. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963) and *The Highest Order of Cultivation in Ta Hsueh and Chung Yung: The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean* Ed. Trans. And Compiled by Andrew Planks (New York: Penguin Books Limited, 2003).

² Wing –tsit Chan, *Ibid.*, 85.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *New World Encyclopedia* (Wujing) <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Wujing>

⁵ Sunyatsen, *The Three Principles of the People: San Min Chu I* (Taipei: China Publishing Co, 1927), 33-34.

⁶ This section is borrowed from Jinli He, “Confucian Ren Ethics: The Relational Person and Family Feeling” *Philosophy Manual: A South-south Perspective* (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), 149-151.

⁷ Confucius, “The Great Learning” cited in <http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/learning.html> accessed on November 25, 2020

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