

CONFUCIAN SELF-CULTIVATION AND CULTURAL DIALOGUE

Tran Tuan Phong

Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

Abstract

This paper deals with the concept of self-cultivation within the Confucian tradition. This idea provides a foundation for the understanding of what human nature holds in common. Though cultural traditions are *different* but they are equal because they all share the common root of human nature as the original source for their specific interpretations of human development. It concludes that this commonality of human nature which lies beneath cultural difference can be the foundation for inter-cultural dialogue.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เกี่ยวข้องกับมโนทัศน์แห่งการปลูกฝังตนเองตามประเพณีซึ่งความคิดนี้วางรากฐานที่ทำให้เข้าใจว่าธรรมชาติของมนุษย์มีอะไรที่เหมือนกัน แม้ว่าวัฒนธรรมประเพณีจะ “แตกต่าง” กัน แต่มันก็ “เท่าเทียมกัน” เพราะว่าแต่ละวัฒนธรรมมาจากรากเหง้าเดียวกัน คือ ธรรมชาติของมนุษย์ซึ่งเป็นแหล่งกำเนิดของการตีความหมายของการพัฒนาของมนุษย์ บทความนี้สรุปว่า ความเหมือนกันของธรรมชาติของมนุษย์ที่รองรับความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมนั้นสามารถเป็นพื้นฐานของการสานเสวนาระหว่างวัฒนธรรมได้

In the Confucian tradition, the idea of self-cultivation could be interpreted as the development or unfolding of human nature. While a particular cultural tradition is the context within which human nature is embedded or embodied (or being concretized and determined), the rich

variety of cultural traditions demonstrates the manifestation of *human creativity* in interpreting and developing human nature. Although cultural traditions are *different*, in another sense they are *equal* because they all share the common root of human nature as the original (and common) source for their specific (and therefore different) interpretations and developments of human nature. This is the very foundation of inter-cultural dialogue, in which different cultural traditions are to participate *equally* to contribute to forming the common culture of humanity and to the cause of peace and development of Humanity.

Human Nature, Human Development and Cultural Tradition

Before showing that the Confucian idea of self-cultivation could be understood as the process of human development, I would like first to clarify the notion of human nature and how human development could be understood as the development of human nature, within the historical context of a particular cultural tradition.

To say that all human beings share a common human nature, I do not mean that human nature as something fixed or a priori given or a potential to be made actual. On the contrary, human nature should be understood *ontologically* as the original source and the infinite potentiality for human development. It means that human nature should not be understood as an *abstract universal* existing above and away from the life of human beings. On the contrary, it should be seen as a *concrete universal* that manifests or unfolds dynamically in the history of humankind as a whole, and as the whole, it exists immanently in the life of human beings. Thus, as the original source, human nature offers both the possibility and the commonality for human development. It is the point of reference and shared background for the whole of human existence. As such, human nature offers both a dynamic feature and unity of the whole process of human development. The full development of human nature, or the full realization (or unfolding) of human nature, could serve as the ideal and ultimate meaning for human striving. The idea of human development mentioned in Marx's writing also means the full development of human powers and capacities "The cultivation of all the qualities of the

social human being, production of the same in a form as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations—production of this being as the most total and universal social product for, in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures, hence cultured to a high degree”.¹

As infinite potentiality, human nature is open for human beings to interpret and choose. The variety of interpretations demonstrates the variety of expressions of human creativity in the development of human nature within different cultural contexts or traditions. A cultural tradition is both the manifestation of human creativity and the particularization of human nature in concrete historical contexts. Human creativity here has much to do with human self-awareness, the very awareness of the potentiality of human nature and the ability to choose a particular option and act in particular situation to unfold further (the potentiality of) human nature. Of course self-awareness is not given to human beings at the moment of birth but the result of education and socialization in the form of social life of a certain community. As such human creativity is the cultivation and manifestation of human nature in a given community but is also the driving force contributing to further developing of human nature and transforming of the cultural tradition in which it was formed. So, it is the openness of human nature as infinite potentiality that contributes to the dynamic character of human development and the diversity of cultural traditions.

Thus, through the creative process of human development, human nature is made, defined and concretized in the various forms of culture (or cultural tradition). In other words, human nature does not exist apart from cultural traditions but realizes or embodies in them through the creative activity of concrete human agencies. The concrete realization or embodiment of human nature in a specific cultural tradition can be seen in the way people of a community organize their collective life. As such the embodiment of human nature is the *emerging quality* in the life of a community. It serves as a pattern of organization that gives order, co-ordination and stability to the life of the people of that community and consequently to help the people of the community to develop their talents and abilities to the fullness. As the pattern or form of organization of a given community, the manifestation of human nature offers both oppor-

tunities and limitations for the people of the community to develop their potentiality.

So we can see that human development, as the process of unfolding of human nature, is mediated through different stages and in different historical contexts of cultural traditions. Cultural traditions here serve as the historical and social space, within which human individuals are born and they become human persons during the process of socialization, through education and training that initiate and engage them into the social life of the community. Thus the formation of human beings as social beings is conditioned by traditional cultures but once they are (more or less) formed, they can continue to develop further the potentiality of human nature and transform the traditional culture in which they are born and being socialized. Human beings, therefore, are in a constant dialogue with their own traditions to be formed and educated as well as in a dialogue with human nature to transform their own traditional culture.

While being located between a given cultural tradition and human nature, human beings are both the passive receivers of that tradition and the active agencies who can change and transform the given tradition. Here we can see the dialectical relation between cultural tradition as a normative *system (structure)* of values, customs and norms...and cultural tradition as a living *social practice* for human development. Thus system determines the formation of man: in order to become a member of a given cultural community, an individual has to undergo a process of learning and training (cultivation and self-cultivation) to obtain necessary social skills and faculties. But only through the course of the social practice of these very members the system can exist and renewed or changed. As C. Taylor writes “Social tradition can continue to exert an influence through individuals only to the extent that it is continually renewed by them – like all structures, it continues to exist by virtue of practice”.² That practice, as C. Taylor rightly points out, “relies on a never exhausted background which can simultaneously be the source of innovative statements and articulations”.³

Thus in order to maintain and develop further cultural tradition human beings must be properly cultivated and developed through the process of learning and training, through the practical engagement in real life. The real knowledge or standards of truth based on which one can

strive to cultivate and improve oneself can only be given, accepted and transmitted by cultural tradition in which one lives. Through the self-cultivation man can learn to know how to relate meaningfully and properly to other human beings and things to the world around him. It is the cultural tradition that serves the foundation for individuals to cultivate themselves and engage in the world but only through the active engagement of human individuals that cultural tradition is transformed and renewed constantly. The renovation and transformation of cultural tradition is, at the same time, the further unfolding and development of human nature, which serves as the original source and the ultimate purpose for human striving. As J. Grondin rightly says, “What distinguishes our humanity, is not a rational capacity that would catapult us into a divine world of pure ideas. Rather it is the ability to go beyond our particularity by taking account the heritage that can help us grow above and beyond our limited selves”.⁴

So we can see how human development as the unfolding of human nature is mediated through different cultural traditions. While being located within that dynamic process of human development, cultural traditions are the concretizations of human nature. So here we can see the dialectical relationship between human development and cultural traditions: without cultural traditions human nature remains potential and formless, only through the formation of cultural traditions that human nature is given shape and form (or being determined), however, human nature serves as the source and condition of possibility for cultural traditions to be developed. The concrete contents of cultural traditions are the manifestations of human nature in different contexts. The human character of cultural traditions is the product of the creative interpretation of human beings about human nature.

Confucian self-cultivation and cultural dialogue

The formation of man as a social being is a process of socialization, in which human individuals engage with the world and participate in living social practice. It is a continuous process of transformation of the self, both ethically and ontologically, and is the very process in which

self-openness (self-discovery) and the disclosure of the things and the world around are taken place simultaneously. For example, Foucault notices that for both the Greeks and the Romans “In order to behave properly, in order to practice freedom properly, it was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one’s self...and to improve one’s self, to surpass one’s self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you”.⁵ Or according to Gadamer, *Bildung* (education or cultivation), is the “properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities”⁶ and “the rise of the word ‘*Bildung*’ evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he fashioned, and which man cultivate in himself”.⁷ Gadamer also agrees with Hegel that “the being of *Geist* (spirit) has an essential connection with the idea of *Bildung*’, through which man ‘acquiring a “capacity”, a skill’ and therefore, ‘gains the sense of himself’⁷ because ‘it is the universal nature of human *Bildung* to constitute itself as a universal intellectual being’.⁸ Thus through the process of human *Bildung* man overcomes his own particularity and rise to the universal. It is the process of gaining both the sense of himself and the sense of the world around him.

The similar approach to human development could be seen in the idea of self-cultivation within the classics of Confucianism, especially in the *Chung-yung* we can see that the full development of human nature can be achieved through the self-cultivation or the realization of ‘human nature’ endowed by Heaven. “What Heaven (*T’ien*, Nature) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (*Tao*). Cultivating the Way is called education”.⁹ Education or self-cultivation is the cultivation of the human nature in us. In Confucianism, therefore, self-cultivation is very crucial because “when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world”.¹⁰ Self-cultivation is a kind of life-long dialogue, both with “Heaven” (or human nature endowed by Heaven) and with a given cultural tradition (in which the Way has already been unfolded). As Tsai Yen-Zen rightly sums up “Self-cultivation as a lifelong moral effort is both a deepening and a broadening process. It involves two dimensions that are simultaneously interrelated. Vertically it elevates one toward Heaven by delving into the depth of one’s inner nature. Horizontally it expands one’s

narrow self to include other human beings whom one may or may not be acquainted with. Self-cultivation then is not a solitary or privatized exercise that seeks joy in spiritual ecstasy or finds consolation in inner peace. Rather, the highest state of personality achieved by this kind of moral effort, popularly attributed to a sage, culminates in the commonality that is sharable among all human beings. This is the point where our universal human nature lies and the platform upon which we humans mutually communicate”.¹¹ Thus upon a proper process of self-cultivation a man will know how to manage his family, bring order to the state and pacify the world. Thus self-cultivation should be understood both ethically and ontologically, this is the task for everyone “From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation”.¹²

Through the process of self-cultivation man gets access to the True Knowledge, the very ‘knowledge’ of the Tao, the Way, or the Order, which regulates the life of every thing in the world. In Confucian tradition living according to the Tao means living harmoniously. Here Harmony is the Way for all creatures to follow. It is clearly stated in the *Doctrine of Means* that “Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish”.¹³ Here harmony is not a static state but rather a dynamic process. And talking about a dynamic process means talking about its relational aspect: the relationship and interconnection between different elements. Harmony or solidarity is the process in which human beings strive for a dynamic balance.

Thus we can see through the self-cultivation man can learn to know how to relate meaningfully and properly to other human beings and things to the world around him. It is the cultural tradition that serves the foundation for individuals to cultivate themselves and engage in the world but only through the active engagement of human individuals that cultural tradition is transformed and renewed constantly. It is the very process when social solidarity of human beings, peace and human flourishing could be established and maintained.

As the concretizations of human nature in concrete historical and social contexts through the process of human creative activities, cultural

traditions are plural and different. Cultural traditions are different but they are equal because they are all the manifestations of human nature. The differences between cultural traditions depend not only on the creativity of human agencies but also on concrete historical contexts and the needs of concrete human communities. Cultural development should be oriented to solve concrete issues and problems encountered by the people in concrete communities. The differences mean differences in focus, differences in orientations of how to develop human nature in different contexts. It means that the differences between cultural traditions *could be complimentary* to each other. So though cultural traditions are *different* but they are equal because they all share the common root of human nature as the original (and common) source for their specific (and therefore different) interpretations and developments of human nature. This is the very foundation of inter-cultural dialogue, in which different cultural traditions are to participate equally to contribute to forming the common culture of humanity.

Therefore, the sustainability of human development should be founded on cultural traditions, not merely on a specific cultural traditions but also on the very culture of humanity. In this context, human development is also the process of learning from others, the process of dialogue aiming at the sustaining and further unfolding of human potentiality. The Good Life or the Life of Peace is the goal and guiding principle for human development understood as a kind of growing beyond one's limited self. This is a kind of self-transcendence can be archived through the dynamic process of self-cultivation understood both in its moral and ontological senses. We can say that the noble goal of the Good Life, the Life of Peace, determines the formation of human beings, but it is only through the active self-cultivation of human beings that the concept of the good life can be realized. As it is said in Confucian classic of *Analects*: "A person can make the Way great, but the Way cannot make a person great".

Endnotes

¹K. Marx. *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. P. 409.

²C. Taylor. *Language and Society*, in *Communicative Action*. Edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 25.

³C. Taylor. *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁴J. Grondin. *Sources of Hermeneutics*. State University of New York Press, New York, 1995.

⁵J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen, eds. *The Final Foucault*. (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1994), p. 5.

⁶H. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition (Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, New York. 2003) p. 10.

⁷H. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition (Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, New York. 2003) p. 11.

⁸H. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition (Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Continuum, New York. 2003) p. 10.

⁹Chan, Wing-tsit. 1963. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 98.

¹⁰Chan, Wing-tsit. 1963. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 86-87.

¹¹Tsai Yen-Zen (2008). Selfhood and Fiduciary Community: A Smithian Reading of TU Weiming's Confucian Humanism in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7(4), p. 358.

¹²Chan, Wing-tsit. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 87.

¹³Chan, Wing-tsit. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 98.