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## EDUCATION IN SEARCH OF TRUTH GOOD BEAUTY - DICUSSING TRUTH GOOD BEAUTY AS SELF-CULTIVATION IN CONFUCIUS' PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION & ITS ENLIGHTENMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

The Confucian primary educational aim centres on the concept of *ren* (benevolent), which is to cultivate the person of *ren* or exemplary person (human quality of truth, good, and beauty); Its curriculum consists of teaching the Six Arts including *li* or rites (good), *yue* or music (beauty), *she* or archery (truth), *yu* or charioteering (truth), *shu* or reading (truth), and *\*shu* or mathematics (truth). The Confucian pedagogy focuses on three major instructions such as connecting knowing and acting, teaching students according to their aptitude, and skillful directing. This study, from the perspective of truth, good and beauty as self-cultivation, analyzes Confucius' educational aim of cultivating the whole development of self. Current issues in early childhood education are introduced. The enlightenment of Confucius' education is discussed to shed lights on the significance of the current educational studies.

**Keywords:** Confucius, Self-cultivation, education, truth, good, beauty.

### INTRODUCTION

The harmony and the unity among truth, good, and beauty is the ideal realm for humans to hope for. The human beings' highest life purpose in the present is to lead truthful, good, and beautiful lives. Humankind's preeminent educational aim is the exploration of and the search for truth, good, and beauty. Confucius' philosophy is the basis of the constitution of China's educational ideals. During an extensive period of experimentation, Confucius established an educational system comprising educational aim, curriculum, and instruction. Confucius' primary educational aim centres on the concept of *ren* (benevolent), which is to cultivate the exemplary person (human qualities of truth, good, and beauty); Its curriculum consists of teaching the Six Arts including *li* or rites (good), *yue* or music (beauty), *she* or archery (truth), *yu* or charioteering (truth), *shu* or reading (truth), and *\*shu* or mathematics (truth). Confucius' pedagogy focuses on three major instructions such as connecting knowing and acting, teaching students according to their aptitude, and skillful directing.

Confucius' educational aim, curriculum, and methods reflect the characteristics of the educational system in ancient China. They also produce the groundwork for ancient Chinese educational philosophy. Confucius' educational theories greatly contribute to elevating the level of China's cultural intelligence (truth), moral disposition (good), and artistic work (beauty). Its educational system also plays a major role in maintaining the nation's security and its development. This study, from the perspective of truth, good, and beauty as self-cultivation, provides a context to understand the need to educate the whole development of self who understands truth, approaches good, and pursues beauty at early childhood. Ultimately it makes us ponder: how to educate?

### SELF-CULTIVATION THAT UNDERSTANDS TRUTH

**What is Truth in Confucius?** Truth in Confucius' philosophy of education is the law of the universe and social principles (Zhao, 2013). They can be found in the *Book of Changes*. The enduring impact of the *Changes* simply reflects the great concern that humans feel towards their own fates, to improve their daily lives by discovering which objects, relations, and acts please or displease the spirits (Judy, 2011). Thus, scientific

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discovery is encouraged, so that students can learn to observe and reflect, to be able to perform a task with persistence, and to understand the universe as a value system.

**The Confucian Educational Aim:** It is believed that the intellectual and moral knowledge from ancient classics provides rich resources for dealing with present problems. This proposition is based on the idea that the actual process of self-cultivation involves universal and sociological realities of human life (Judy, 2011). To cultivate oneself and to practise moral knowledge are what the Confucian philosophy of education aims at.

Moral knowledge is an endowment human beings get from Heaven (Ames, 2003). For example, in the *Analects*, it explains that “Tian has given life to and nourished excellence in me” (Book 7: 23). Although Confucius says little of a concrete and specific nature about moral knowledge, it gives the concepts high precedence in becoming an ideal person. For instance, Confucius reminds students: “if in serving your lord you are unrelenting, you will bring on disgrace; if in your friendships you are unrelenting, you will find yourself ostracized” (Book 4: 26). Through moral knowledge, a person becomes a “larger” individual in that he or she focused on a sphere that goes far beyond the range of any ego-self. The Confucian educational curriculum.

**The Confucian Educational Curriculum:** Knowledge and skills are means to achieve Confucius’ educational aim of cultivating intelligent character (Yao, 2012). The *Book of Changes* is used to teach mathematical knowledge (数): the history of math, the principle of math, and the transferable relation between scientific knowledge and social knowledge. It is recorded in the *Book of Rites* that the attainment of *Changes* makes one’s mind “pure and still, refined and subtle” and prevents “the violation of reason”. Reading (书) is taught through *Book of Documents*, which is a collection of historical documents. It contains the records of the discussion, reports, and the major events by the rulers and officials in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasty (2070-771BC). It is said that the *Book of Documents* cultivate people to have “a wide comprehension (of things), and know what is remote and old” (Book of Rites: The Different teaching of the different kings: 1, 2). Even physical activities such as charioteering (御) and archery (射) are channels through which intelligent self and life are conceptualized.

**The Confucian Educational Instruction:** Knowing-acting is the habit of hearing more and seeing more. In the *Analects*, Confucius describes the positive results of this teaching method:

hear much and put aside the points of which you stand in doubt, while you speak cautiously at the same time of the others – then you will afford few occasions for blame. See much and put aside the things which seem perilous, while you are cautious at the same time in carrying the others into practice – then you will have few occasions for repentance (Book 2: 18).

The habit of seeing more and listening more represents a sincere and respectful attitude to treat others as teachers and mentors. How does one to achieve this goal? Confucius told his students that to be “an active nature and yet fond of learning”, one must “not ashamed to ask and learn of his inferiors!” (Book 5: 15).

**Issues of Self-Cultivation:** Researchers examining young children’s cognitive activity are facing two specific issues. The first issue is self-appraisal and self-management. Self-appraisal means awareness of one’s own cognitive processes and products. Self-management means the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of one’s intellectual performance (Fang & Fox, 1999). However, most young children do not believe that mental processes are important in cognitive activity (Annevirta & Vauras, 2001, p. 276).

The second issue in early childhood education is that, students are typically not used to the idea of working independently when learning something (Annevirta & Vauras, 2001). The current educational task of fostering inventive, creative, and critical thinkers is to provide opportunities for teachers to figure out what the learners already know and how he or she reasons in order to ask the right question at the right time so that learners can build his or her own knowledge (Sharkawy, 2010). How do teachers balance an understanding of the habits, traits, and dispositions of an individual child with an understanding of the means for arousing her/his curiosity?

**Implication of Confucius’ Self-Cultivation:** Confucius teaches us that knowledge helps people develop noble characters (Kim, 2003). Knowledge can open our eyes and help us see far so we can avoid short-sighted visions and narrow-minded deeds. To cultivate knowledge and capacities, we must have a method. Experience is the first method; reading is the second method; learning

with others is the third method. Experience is the origin of all knowledge and morality. If we want to obtain experience, we must know how to appreciate right and wrong. Books record the achievements of the remote and the foreign as well as the knowledge contribution from the intellectuals. They greatly benefit our learning skills. Yet, we are not the ones who have general understandings about all branches of knowledge, and the sensible ability to distinguish right from wrong. Thus, it is important to teach young children to learn from others.

#### **SELF-CULTIVATION THAT APPROACHES GOOD**

**What is Good in Confucius?** The Confucian definition of good is established on the idea of *ren* (benevolence). *Ren* is a universal concept and has to be shared by everyone in society. For example, filial love is a love towards parents. It is also a respect for elderly persons and a righteous love for all under the sky (An, 2008; Bi & D'Agostino, 2004). *Li* (ritual propriety) is the concrete representation of a sage, who has the ability to self-regulate one's conduct (Lai, 2007). Confucius concludes in the *Analects*: "Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative in one's conduct" (Book 12: 1).

Confucius' propriety means "The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son" (Book 12: 11). It denotes the practice of sagehood to reach an eternal quality of *ren* (benevolence). The result of such person is the combination of virtuous character with kingly accomplishments in the world (Shuo & Lin, 2006). Subduing one's personal wishes to return to rites such as one's expressing filial piety is an individual's *ren* (benevolent) conduct of being respectful to others and finding brothers within the world (Mullis, 2010).

**The Confucian Educational Aim:** Benevolent character is what Confucius aims to cultivate. The Confucian educational concern regarding educating the good nature of human beings is "through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety" (*Analects*, Book 12: 1). To be good is to be "authoritative" (Book 12: 1). Virtue is not something persons are, it is something that persons do and become. Put differently, a morally cultivated person, by practicing benevolence (*ren*) in the complex web of human relationships, is the most authentic and humane person.

Benevolence is considered difficult and requires life-long practice. Although the Confucian education emphasizes the difficulty of practising benevolence, it also makes it

abundantly clear that whether we succeed or not depends solely on ourselves and on our own self-cultivation. When the comment is made in the *Analects*, "Becoming authoritative in one's conduct is self-originating - how could it originate with others?" (Book 12: 1), Confucius states clearly that failure to practice benevolence is not because of the lack of strength to carry it through. It further explains: "Are there people who, for the space of a single day, have given their full strength to authoritative conduct? I have yet to meet them. As for lacking the strength to do so, I doubt there are such people- at least I have yet to meet them" (Book 4: 6). Benevolence, as a virtuous character, is a life-long cultivation.

**The Confucian Educational Curriculum:** The book of *Spring and Autumn*, the collection of canonical writings that transmit the rituals and historical and political thoughts, is used for transmitting social and moral knowledge. It teaches students to "suitably adapt their language to the things of which they speak" and "have no disposition to the insubordinate" (*Book of Rites*). Good character is also taught through ceremonial "rites" (礼) (Brindley, 2011). According to the *Book of ceremonial rites*, Ji Li (吉礼) worships the gods, nature, and ancestors. Jia Li (嘉礼) is the ceremony of wedding and festival activities. Bin li (宾礼) is the diplomatic and hospitality ceremony. Jun li (军礼) is the Code of Conduct in warfare. Xong li (凶礼) is mourning and sympathy courtesy ceremony. These refined cultural practices direct sage-kings and exemplary persons' good conduct. Consequently, when individuals habitually perform disciplined, graceful, and deferential physical postures and movements, they develop reverential, dignified, and modest intentions toward others and use rites to establish good society (Fernandez, 2004; Lai, 2007).

**The Confucian Educational Instruction:** Confucius' educational methods represent student-centred approach. In the *Analects*, it is stated: "in instruction, there is no such thing as social classes" (Book 15: 39). Anyone can come to receive education from Confucius. The *Analects* records Confucius' own words: "The Master said, 'I have never failed to instruct students who, using their own resources, could only afford a gift of dried meat.'" (Book 7: 7). Confucius pays attention to observing students who decide to study with him. "Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won't you know what kind

of person they are? Won't you know what kind of person they are?" (Book 2: 10). Confucius notices students' shortcomings: "Zilu is decisive...Zigong knows what is going on..." (Book 6: 8); "Zizhang oversteps the mark, and Zixia falls short of it" (Book 11: 16). He also acknowledges their strengths: "Distinguished for their virtuous principles and practice, there are Yan Yuan, Min Zi Qian, Ran Bo Niu, and Zhong Gong; for their ability in speech, Zai Wo and Zi Gong; For their administrative talents, Ran You and Ji Lu; For their literary acquirements, Zi You and Zi Xia" (Book 11: 3).

**Issues of Self-Cultivation:** Self-regulated learning is defined as independent, academically effective forms of learning that involve intrinsic motivation and strategic action (Perry, VanderKamp, Mercer & Norby, 2002). However, one of the self-regulated learning problems facing educators is that children demonstrate motivational vulnerabilities. For example, children exhibits negative affect when offered feedback that pinpoints errors in their work, and they chose easy tasks over challenging tasks that provide opportunities to develop and practice self-regulated learning (Perry, et al., 2002). These perceptions influence their beliefs about themselves as learners, their goals and expectations, and the decisions they make about how to regulate their behavior in school (p. 5).

**Implication of Confucius' Self-Cultivation:** Confucius says in the *Analects*: "If you do your utmost to make good on your word, and you are earnest and respectful in your conduct, even though you are living in the barbarian states of Man or Mo, your conduct will be proper" (Book 15:6). Here, it teaches us that people shall approach moral characteristics of making good on one's word and seeking out what's appropriate (Ames, 2002). If an individual can use these two standards to guide his or her communication with others, to be open and considerate, even the most ignorant and worst person cannot offend him or her. If one disobeys moral standards, and treats others with untruthful manners, then even the most gentle and polite person will treat him or her with impolite manner. Thus, we must teach young children the law of respect and love.

#### **SELF-CULTIVATION THAT PURSUES BEAUTY**

**What is Beauty in Confucius?** Confucius uses poetry (诗) and music (乐) to cultivate individuals' aesthetic character. In the *Analects*, he explains the function of learning poetry as to "arouse your sensibilities,

strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills" (Book 17: 9). The *Book of Rites* indicates that music nourishes an aesthetic character that is "large-hearted and generous, bland and honest". Through learning about music and poetry, students connect with the poets' and the music masters' emotions and understand their meanings so that they can listen to different views, see different things, and be adaptive in complex situations while expressing their wishes and desires. Thus, the character of "having no depraved thought" reflects the pureness of the man of virtue (彬彬君子) who has both free spirit and good knowledge (Cai, 1999).

**The Confucian Educational Aim:** The Confucian philosophy of education indicates that aesthetic emotions represent aesthetic character. The Confucian teaching is to experience with disciples many kinds of emotions such as worry, anger, love, hate, grief, joy and so on (Grange, 2004). For instance, as recorded in the *Analects*, Confucius expresses his worry as "to fail to cultivate excellence, to fail to practice what I learn, on coming to understand what is appropriate in the circumstances to fail to attend to it, and to be unable to reform conduct that is not productive" (Book 7: 3). To have a great concern about learning can transform an individual to become a sage like Confucius, whose lively characters in the *Analects* are depicted like this: he should be someone who "is driving by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat, he enjoys himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way" (Book 7: 19).

Love towards learning is also expressed by words to admire others' aesthetic characters. For example, words are used to express admiration towards the virtuous conducts of ancient sages who "establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves" (Book 6: 30). Words are also used to express admiration towards the dedicated student: "There was one Yan Hui who truly loved learning. He did not take his anger out on others; he did not make the same mistake twice" (Book 6: 3). Thus, emotions are an important component of the Confucian education.

**The Confucian Educational Curriculum:** Confucius appreciates the Shao music, and says that it "is both superbly beautiful (*mei*) and superbly felicitous (*shan*)" (*Analects*, Book 3: 25) because the Shao music is made by the King of Shun who is a virtuous person. Confucius

speaks highly of the Shao music and claims that after hearing it, “for several months he did not know the taste of meat” (Book 7: 14). Thus, the role of music is not for entertainment; it is to transform individuals’ feelings toward the rational world into art so that the emotions such as joy, sorrow, anger, reverence and love can be formalized and concretized (Gier, 2001; 2004). On the other hand, one also learns from the Book of Poetry “to serve your father,” “to serve your lord”, and to instill “...in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you” (*Analects*, Book 17: 9). Music and poetry learning help students develop a sense of appreciation.

**The Confucian Educational Instruction:** The cultivation of aesthetic character demands artistic educational practice. Confucius skillfully guides students the way of thinking that he knows but cannot think of, instead of giving them direct answers. For example, Confucius focuses on students who have “eager” and “anxious” attitudes. The right teaching moment is when an eager student wants to understand but cannot after giving numerous thoughts, or an anxious student wants to express but still do not know how after accumulated some experiences and thought things through. Otherwise, for Confucius, it is not the time to teach (*Analects*, Book 7: 8). Confucius emphasizes the importance of interests and joy in learning (Xu, 1993). He claims: “to truly love it is better than just to understand it, and to enjoy it is better than simply to love it” (Book 6: 20). Finally, Confucius encourages students to become teachers themselves. It states: “In striving to be authoritative in your conduct (*ren*), do not yield even to your teacher” (Book 15: 36).

**Issues of Self-Cultivation:** The main issue in early childhood education is this: to understand purposes of life, to understand how they can influence self-awareness would be a powerful way to illuminate the precise unfolding of regulation skills. Metacognitive regulation reflects the requisite awareness to choose when faced with negative situations (Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010, p. 507). Young children’s metacognitive emotion regulation strategies are a state of self-reflection. How to make children aware of themselves as mental agents who use more self-regulatory skills and demonstrate flexibility? How to encourage them to be willing, open, and able to discuss their own behaviour and problem-solving strategies?

**Implication of Confucius’ Self-Cultivation:** Confucius teaches us: “To demand much from oneself personally, and not overmuch from others, will keep ill will at a distance” (*Analects*, Book 15:15). This ideal of self-control is the method to cultivate aesthetic virtue of endurance. Endurance helps us conquer anger (Xu, 1993). Each of us has different perception just like each of us has different appearance. If we are mad at people who hold different views than ours, we will see fathers and sons who stop talking to each other, husband and wife who start to hate each other, brothers who fight with each other or friends who become enemies. Is not this consequence led by being narrow-minded?

Another aesthetic character is courage (Jiang, 2012). Whether it is life accomplishments or academic performances, nothing can be obtained with ease. To face difficulties, to accept challenges, to welcome uncertainties, and to use full strength to reach the final goal no matter how difficult the circumstances are, they are motivation that courage brings. Human courage must include aesthetic qualities such as morality and wisdom. Courage always manifests itself at the moment of completing a professional career and during the experience of revealing the beauty of life. Thus, we must teach children at early age to appreciate beauty and to create beauty.

#### **THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF CONFUCIUS’ SELF-CULTIVATION AS TRUTH GOOD BEAUTY**

Confucius’ educational wisdom of self-cultivation as truth, good, and beauty are united wholeness. It transforms itself: from the perspective of cognition, it is truth; from the perspective of will, it is good; from the perspective of appreciation, it is beauty. From this perspective, a being should be a whole being; and the aim of early childhood education is to self-cultivate truth, good, and beauty as fundamental characteristics. However, we have forgotten the teachings of our sage. The problematic human mind, conduct, and feelings are results of unbalanced education focusing solely on science, technology and material gain. The absence of moral and ethical cultivation of individual heart-mind-body is the reason why the “philosophical” aspect of education and culture is missing. The absence of truth, good, and beauty in education results in people who deprive of wisdom in mind, morality in conduct, and beauty in heart.

The ultimate purpose of seeking truth, good, and beauty in education is to enhance the heart-mind-body quality

of each child. Self-education focusing on the value of truth, good and beauty aims at a well-rounded student: he or she can be a scientist, a sage and an artist at the same time. They are committed in discovering truth not only because they have a wide range of knowledge, but with strong self-confidence. Their courageous behaviours are in line with common good. They set up righteousness as their highest code of ethics. They have eyes to see not only the light of the moon and the Sun, but also the radiance of rationality; they have both emotions toward the external world and intimacy with the inner world. Their heart is widely open and their speech and deeds are fine and gentle. His or her innovative spirit, good citizenship, and autonomous individuality shall have impact in solving problems in disciplines such as natural science, social science and humanity.

For the prosperous tomorrow, for the establishment of an innovative world, for the bright human future, let education for truth-understanding come alive! Let education for good-approaching carry forward! Let education for beauty-pursuing soar, because - the future world will belong to the ones with truth, good, and beauty!

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