

Introduction

Why Is Confucianism Still Relevant in the Globalized Twenty-First Century?

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Since 2004, China's Hanban (Office of Chinese Language Council International) has established hundreds of Confucius Institutes at universities around the world to teach Chinese language and culture rooted in Confucianism. While attitudes toward these institutes have generally been positive, there are concerns that they are cultural tools of the Chinese government to spread political influence to foreign countries. Amid this milieu, students from Chinese and other Confucian-heritage cultures (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) experience extraordinary academic achievement (especially in STEM fields) across the educational spectrum, further perpetuating the so-called "model minority" discourse. Although the model minority myth has been increasingly debunked by researchers (e.g., Lee, 1996; Liu & Li, 2008; Ma & Li, 2016; Zhao & Qiu, 2009), there remains a common perception that Chinese students and families maintain a special set of Confucian values about education that positively contributes to their academic and career success. The "tiger mother" (Chua, 2011) publicity and the triple package claim, that is, the combination of superiority complex, insecurity, and impulse control (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014), have piqued curiosity in the West about core Chinese cultural values, particularly educational beliefs. More recently, Confucius's impact has even been felt in U.S. judicial circles. For instance, the majority opinion written by Justice Anthony Kennedy

for the landmark *Obergefell v. Hodges* case that makes same-sex marriage a right nationwide includes the statement “Confucius taught that marriage lies at the foundation of government.”

Inarguably, Confucianism is widely viewed as the foundation of Chinese education. Many commonplace Chinese pedagogical viewpoints and practices—for example, *teaching in accordance with the student’s aptitude; studying extensively, inquiring prudently, thinking carefully, distinguishing clearly, and practicing earnestly; and learning without thinking leads to confusion, thinking without learning ends in danger*—are rooted in classic Confucian texts such as the *Analects of Confucius* (论语) and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸). As Lee (2000) puts it, Chinese educational tradition is “formulated and shaped almost entirely by Confucian ideology. The staying power and pervasiveness of the influence of Confucianism on Chinese education can scarcely be exaggerated” (p. 29).

However, Confucianism’s pervasive influence on Chinese society has been controversial, particularly in its recent history. For instance, after the Chinese Communist Party took control of Mainland China in 1949, Confucianism was considered a feudal legacy and the cause of all troubles in China’s past. Yet the situation has changed since China opened its door and deepened its economic reforms in the late 1970s; China has since emerged as the second-largest economy in the world. The so-called Chinese “economic miracle,” combined with earlier economic success in such Asian countries and economies as Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as the growing exposure of socioeconomic problems in Western societies (e.g., corporate greed, shaky family structure, racial tension), has prompted scholars inside China to reevaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Confucianism. There is newfound confidence for Chinese officials and intellectuals, as well as ordinary citizens, to reembrace Confucianism as a core value of Chinese culture, education, and society.

Why are the ideas of Confucius, who lived more than 2,500 years ago, still relevant and important in the 21st century? According to Rainey (2010), we face many of the same problems Confucius faced, such as distrust in governments; great social, economic, and technological changes; a tendency to resort to military intervention; and moral decay in society, to name but a few. Confucianism may offer many solutions and insights to solving these problems both inside and outside China. Concerning education, in response to the unprecedented sociocultural changes brought by digital technologies and global trade, countries

around the world are reforming their education systems not only by raising curriculum standards but also by exploring how to make upcoming generations globally competitive, socially responsible, and morally sound citizens. As educators, policy makers, and the public all search for new conceptual lenses and effective practices, the ancient wisdom of Confucianism could provide a unique perspective for solving current problems in education, too. Indeed, as a bold educational experiment, the BBC even invited a group of Chinese teachers to British schools for four weeks and made a documentary about their practices (Clark, 2015; The Open University, 2015). But what does Confucianism offer to Chinese teachers and, through them, to the rest of the world?

Confucianism: Its Ideas and Practices

Let us take a closer look at some core Confucian ideas and practices. While Confucianism has been claimed to be at once a religion and a philosophy, neither category completely captures the comprehensiveness of Confucianism. This is because Confucianism pertains to both, and throughout Chinese history it has been constantly interpreted and reinterpreted, indeed reconstructed. On the one hand, Confucianism is a religion because it has strong moral expectations of individuals and governments, follows strict rituals (e.g., wedding and funeral procedures), and even has temples for people to worship the legendary sage Confucius. However, unlike other religions, there are no priests; no supreme leaders such as the Roman Catholic pope; no primary sacred texts such as the Christian Bible or Islamic Qur'an; nor does Confucianism promote belief in God or an afterlife. On the other hand, Confucianism obviously shares many of the characteristics of a philosophy. It lays out a worldview of how society, government, and even the universe operate. Confucianism also explains how things in the universe change, and how various changes follow the same principle and are thus highly predictable. Although Confucianism also promotes the idea of Heaven, unlike in Western religions, Heaven is both the source of virtue or moral authority and nature or Dao. Thus, there are many insights from Confucianism about ontology, ethics, and epistemology.

Even though Confucianism is attributed to Kong Fuzi, commonly known as Confucius, who lived during the Spring and Autumn Warring States era of Chinese history (475–221 BCE), Confucian ideas

originated much earlier than Confucius's time, predating the Xia dynasty (2100–1600 BCE), Shang dynasty (1600–1100 BCE), and Zhou dynasty (1100–256 BCE). Confucius was credited for having systematically studied histories and records from previous dynasties and developing a coherent and comprehensive system of ideas applicable to individuals, families, societies, and governments. Even more important, his ideas were widely disseminated through his teaching of thousands of disciples, who in turn taught their students Confucian ideas. Generation upon generation of Confucian believers interpreted and reinterpreted Confucian ideas over thousands of years, and the process continues today. Thus, Confucianism is not a static system of ideas; it is alive and continuously evolving.

There are some key ideas in original Confucian teachings. One of them is filial piety—respect and reverence for one's parents and ancestors. Filial piety extends to other family relationships, such as those between husband and wife and older brother and younger brother. Filial piety is also practiced in relationships beyond the family, such as teacher and student, young and old, master and apprentice, and so on. Filial piety may further be extended to government and society at large. For example, loyalty is expected of officials who hold different positions within government hierarchy. Lower-ranked officials should be loyal to higher-ranked officials, and, ultimately, all people should be loyal to the emperor. Other key ideas include honesty, uprightness, courage, wisdom, sympathy, and compassion. Possessing these values or virtues leads to humanity (*ren* 仁) or benevolence. Rituals also assume an important place in Confucianism. Rituals are customs and conventions to observe, governing both public events, such as the installation of an emperor and opening of a court hearing, weddings and funerals, dress codes, and even classroom behavior. Persons who possess these virtues are called gentlemen (*junzi* 君子). A gentleman is one with high ethical and ritual standards, the result of many years' education and practice. Government officials should be gentlemen who can lead by example. The preceding key ideas are derived from the Confucian classics, namely, the Four Books (*Analecets* 论语, *Mencius* 孟子, *Great Learning* 大学, and *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸) and the Five Classics (*Classic of Poetry* 诗经, *Classic of History* 史记, *Classic of Rites* 礼记, *Book of Changes* 易经, and *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋).

It should be emphasized that Confucianism is not only the philosophy of becoming a gentleman, but it is also a guide for good governance. Because of its direct implications for governance, Confucianism has been

fully integrated into Chinese civil service as a state ideology for more than one thousand years. This integration began in the Sui dynasty (581–618) when the imperial examination system was created. The purpose of the imperial examination was to select people for different levels of civil service. The content of the examination was knowledge and understanding of Confucian classical texts. The examination was multitiered; those who passed different levels were assigned to different civil posts of importance. For 1,300 years after the Sui dynasty, the imperial examination system continued until 1905, when the call for reform was adopted by the late Qing dynasty.

Despite the longevity of Confucianism as a state ideology, there have been brief times during Chinese history when Confucianism was criticized, condemned, and even forbidden. The first emperor, Qin Shihuang, of unified China during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) adopted a Legalist ideology for governance and ordered all Confucian texts burned and Confucian scholars buried alive. During the late Qing dynasty, the last dynasty before the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, with rising technological power in the West and repeated defeat and humiliation of the Chinese imperial army, reform-minded Confucian scholars such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) called for reform of Confucian ideology and Chinese society by embracing Western science and technology. They proposed that Confucianism be viewed as providing moral direction, while Western science and technology were practically applied. Reformers also succeeded in ending the thousand-plus-year-old imperial examination system. After the establishment of the Republic of China, founders of the Chinese Communist Party Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, as well as other reform-minded Confucian intellectuals such as Lu Xun, called for replacing Confucianism with Western science and democracy. Around 1915, the May Fourth Movement perceived Confucianism as the cause of the decline of Chinese military and economic power and the decay of Chinese society in recent history. After the founding of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party of China in 1949, Confucianism continued to be the target of criticism, which peaked during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s when thousands of intellectuals were sent to labor camps for reeducation.

Although Confucius contributed foundational ideas for Confucianism, major reconstruction and enrichment of those ideas took place throughout Chinese history, particularly during the Han and Song dynasties. During Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), Dong Zhongshu advanced

the theories of *yin-yang* (阴阳) and the five elements to explain meanings of Confucian classics. It was believed that there existed two opposing but complementary identities, *yin* (i.e., earth, cold, wife) and *yang* (i.e., sun, hot, husband), in the universe, and the symbiotic relation between them gives meaning to all things. Connecting *yin* and *yang* is the movement of *qi* (or energy). The five-element theory was based on the assumption that there are five basic elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—that move in a fixed cycle, that is, earth is overtaken by wood, wood by metal, metal by fire, fire by water, and water by earth. Thus, by aligning all things in the universe with the five elements, such as the five directions (east, west, south, north, and center) and five human organs (liver, heart, spleen, kidney, and lungs), we can understand all changes in the universe. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1193) advanced the theory of Principle. According to this theory, there exists a Supreme Ultimate (*Tai Ji* 太极) that transcends time and space; *Tai Ji* is an abstract entity that underlies the movement of *qi* and thus the foundation of *yin-yang*.

It must be pointed out that even when Confucianism was under attack in China during the 1950s through the 1970s, Confucian scholars in Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Britain, and the United States continued to advance Confucian ideas in modern contexts, resulting in New Confucianism. More recently, scholars inside China are joining this growing movement, arguing that Confucianism as practiced in ancient China was not authentic and was manipulated by rulers. While Western science, technology, and democracy have advantages, the serious problems or ills commonly identified with Western societies and governments, such as corporate greed, dysfunctional families, and lack of compassion, could be tackled by a Confucian approach. Therefore, for New Confucian scholars, Confucianism should remain at the core of any harmonious society and government.

Objectives

Books in English on Confucian history, religion, philosophy, politics, and Chinese culture, as well as comparisons between Chinese education and American education, are many (e.g., Chang & Kalmanson, 2010; Gardner, 2014; Rainey, 2010; Richey, 2008; Schuman, 2015; Zhao, 2009), but

few of them focus explicitly on the necessity of a quality 21st-century education from a Confucian perspective. Because of the growing common interest both in the East (including the Greater China region) and the West to critically examine Confucian educational thought, 39 scholars in education, philosophy, culture, history, and East Asian studies from China, Canada, and the United States gathered in Amherst, New York, for the International Symposium on Confucianism and Education, October 17–19, 2014. Inspired by the rich interdisciplinary dialogue at the conference, twelve papers were carefully selected and significantly revised to form the core of this volume on Confucianism and contemporary education.

This book not only fills a gap in research, but it also has unique value in a number of ways. First of all, wrestling with the relationship between Confucianism and education and its relevance to today's education in China and the United States, the book explores the Confucian perspective on education as its singular focus, and it does so interdisciplinarily. As its chapters demonstrate, the book addresses several thematic strands, including how and why Confucianism is relevant to American and Chinese education, what Confucian pedagogical principles may be used across various sociocultural settings, and what social and moral functions Confucianism plays. Each of the chapters, while situated within its own theoretical and methodological framework, represents a critical piece in a larger multidimensional puzzle. Together, these chapters form a thought-provoking text, with both conceptual lenses and concrete examples of why and how the Confucian perspective still matters across the educational scene in China, the United States, and beyond. As such, this book will be informative to faculty, researchers, policy makers, school administrators, and parents, as well as students in Chinese and East Asian studies.

Organization

In addition to the foreword and this introduction, there are twelve chapters divided into three sections. Section 1 begins with the central question of why and how Confucianism is relevant in diverse American and Chinese classrooms today. Chapter 1 studies teaching Confucian ideas to American undergraduate students. Using translations of the *Daodejing* (道德经) and the *Analects of Confucius*, Pamela Herron guides students to read, examine, and critically analyze these ancient texts, while

prompting them to make meaningful connections with current events. Based on this teaching experience, she recognizes the educative value for U.S.-born students to study important Confucian concepts such as *ren* (仁) or compassion, *yi* (义) or righteousness, *junzi* (君子) or exemplary person, and *shu* (恕) or forgiveness. She notes that the “shift to understand and appreciate cyclical rather linear thinking is complex but most critical for students to accept.” Chapter 2 takes on the writing mandate in the U.S. Common Core Standards for K–12 students. Arguing that these standards promote a linear deliberation or decision making in the Western tradition of argumentation and persuasion, Lyon maintains that the Chinese rhetorical tradition of remonstrance (*jiàn* 谏) may serve as a useful conceptual lens for writing. Viewing it as a means to respect the audience, build trusting relationships, and engage the social order in ways that exceed legal, political, or partisan boundaries, the author proposes that such Confucian rhetorical practice may supplement, even enrich, the rigid analytical mode of written discourse in English. Chapter 3 describes China’s ongoing movement to revive Confucianism as the core of Chinese traditional culture. Presenting a list of important Confucian viewpoints relevant to today’s Chinese education, the author explains why and how these ideas may provide viable solutions to some of the pressing problems confronting China and Chinese education. Chapter 4 looks at the role and mechanism of ritual in education. Citing multiple Confucian texts on rituals, the chapter portrays a vibrant continuation of rituals in Chinese education today despite repeated attacks on Confucianism in China. Combined, these chapters showcase concrete applications of different Confucian educational principles and practices, elucidating why and how Confucianism is relevant in classroom settings across both China and the United States.

Section 2 contextualizes how various Confucian teaching and learning practices come into being and in what ways such time-honored insights may be reinterpreted to better serve the present needs. Chapter 5 addresses the development of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty and its implications for current Chinese education and society. Drawing from Kuhn’s (1996) seminal work on scientific paradigm, Yair Lior predicts a paradigmatic shift in contemporary Confucianism because geopolitical changes require the construction of an alternative cultural paradigm to satisfy the needs of an increasingly sophisticated population excluded from the traditional center of authority. Though China is in the process of revitalizing its traditional culture and education, Lior

suggests both presentation and structural changes are needed to aid in the paradigmatic shift. Chapter 6 centers on redefining the notion of learning as public reasoning in 17th-century China. With this redefinition seriously challenging the Song-era orthodox Confucian view about how to access the Heavenly Principle (*tianli* 天理) and Way (*dao* 道), the chapter calls for approaching learning through open-ended, dynamic, inclusive, and collective processes. Chapter 7 is a textual analysis of the notions of learning in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经). Based on the *Yijing*, “elementary learning” (小学) differs from “great learning” (大学)—the former emphasizes text-oriented public education, and the latter facilitates individuals’ personal development and creative contribution to build a more vibrant and harmonious society. Therefore, the author maintains that contemporary Chinese education needs to be rebalanced by following an integrated approach, in which strengths from both approaches may complement each other. Chapter 8 deals with the topic of critical thinking. Contrary to popular views, critical thinking is highly emphasized in classic Confucian writings as well as in Confucian pedagogical practices. These chapters not only underscore the relevance of Confucianism for improving teaching and learning outcomes, but they also help to dispel some common stereotypes and misconceptions related to Confucian conceptions of learning.

Finally, section 3 turns to the social and moral functions and the intellectual values of education. Chapter 9 holds that the embodied Confucian approach not only involves acquiring knowledge and information about the world, but it also invokes inner change through cultivation of virtue to elevate one’s heart-mind. Only then can the learner become a transformative force to improve the world. Therefore, Confucianism offers a method to integrate the personal with the social, the outer with the inner, and the learning of knowledge with transformative action. Chapter 10 connects Confucianism with multicultural education. Based on the Confucian notion of selfhood, which is defined as a relation, an expanding process, and the realization of Heaven-Endowed Humanity, Wang argues that Confucianism can help refine the current multicultural education framework, while multiculturalism can also give new ground for Confucian thought to evolve. Chapter 11 discusses moral and ethical education in light of ever-accelerating technological advancement and globalization. Because an individual goes through formation of moral character, commitment and critique, and reflection and action as ways of life, the chapter insists that moral education should carefully consider

both the founding process and manifesting process of moral life. Finally, chapter 12 concludes with a critical inquiry into the intricate and complicated conceptual connections among Confucianism, democracy, and the global education movement. While Confucian values compatible with modern cosmopolitan democracy can render critical support for community-based sustainable economic development, Li cautions us against romanticizing Confucianism because the Confucian ideal of a cohesive polity is simultaneously conducive to the modern nation-state that promotes economic growth at the cost of ecological decline. In summary, these chapters inform us of the social and moral missions and functions that education plays. Extending our thinking way beyond a specific set of disciplinary rules and job skills, this section highlights the centrality of social and moral functions within a Confucian educational framework. The implications of these chapters follow.

Implications

As editors of this volume, we are impressed by the level of diversity that penetrates the pages, both in terms of wide-ranging research areas (e.g., K–12 and college teaching, Chinese and American education, and various historical periods) and different approaches (e.g., case study, conceptual comparison, discourse analysis, pedagogical reflection, and theory-driven inquiry). This, we believe, reflects the incredible depth and breadth of Confucian ideas; it is also a reflection of the complex and diverse educational situations in which Confucian principles and practices may be applied. As editors, we view this as a strength of the book and a demonstration of the potential for more systematic scholarly inquiry.

As manifested across different chapters, Confucianism is an invaluable mine of wisdom beneficial to Chinese and American students alike. In addition to broad educational principles, there are numerous time-honored Confucian practices, ranging from well-known adages to core Confucian pedagogical guidelines, that are compatible with the latest research-based pedagogical practices (e.g., *education for all without discrimination, connecting theory with practice, knowledge and action go hand in hand, lifelong learning*, etc.). As elaborated by Fangping Cheng (chapter 3, this volume), many of the core Confucian values are being preserved, adapted, and revived in China's current educational and sociocultural fabric, including reverence to teachers and the elderly, balancing the

acquisition of professional knowledge and skills, and the cultivation of personhood and moral values.

Because many Confucian ideas have universal value, we believe that they can benefit Chinese and American students alike. For instance, drawing on her actual teaching experience with American college students, Herron argues in chapter 1, “If all the world followed the precepts taught by Confucius and Mencius, the world would surely be a more peaceful, better governed, and more harmonious place. The best we can strive for in education is to share the teachings of Kong Fuzi with our students and hope that instilling those values and principles will guide them to make their world and the world of our future children a better place to live.” At the K–12 level, Lyon (chapter 2) recognizes that the goal of the Western argument through persuasion is “to formulate a position more than to engage an audience,” whereas the Confucian model of remonstrance (*jiàn 谏*) adds the benefit of engaging the audience and considering its response, thus making remonstrance a useful supplement in the Common Core Standards for writing. Furthermore, because the Confucian notion of the Great Harmony embraces differences while adhering to harmony, Wang (in chapter 10) sees the Confucian notion of selfhood as a useful conceptual lens to expand the current multicultural educational framework beyond the confinement of the prevailing cultural mainstream. All these implications convey one key message: The Confucian perspective has much to offer to the field of education in China and the United States.

We recognize that “anti-Confucianism” arguments exist in the literature. One such argument is related to the sensitive topic of China’s “soft power.” Undeterred by concerns that teaching Confucianism adds to China’s efforts to promote its “soft power,” Herron queries why people seldom question the traditions and teachings of Judaism and the Torah, Christianity and the Bible, or Islam and the Qur’an but are concerned about teaching the Confucian perspective. While it is prudent to keep in mind Li’s (chapter 12) remarks about not “romanticizing” Confucianism in the 21st century’s global context, it will be wise to carefully consider how to make the past serve the present. This is the real “soft power” that lies beneath both teaching and learning Confucius’s ideas.

We also acknowledge the arguments that some of Confucius’s ideas promote rigidity, hierarchy, and conformity, which may have contributed to today’s Chinese education system being both the best and worst in the world (Zhao, 2014). We do not imply that Confucianism is sufficient for

any education system; thus, Confucianism must be followed entirely or blindly. We propose that Confucianism is not a “dead” school of thought that belonged only to the past. Nor is Confucianism static; it is constantly evolving. As demonstrated by chapters of this book, Confucianism is a complex system of diverse ideas. In fact, New Confucianism scholars in China have already started to critically reexamine its cultural legacy, to inherit its useful elements, and then to apply them in accordance to today’s specific sociocultural conditions and circumstances. What is real Confucianism remains a topic of scholarly debate. For example, Wu (2011) argues that the authentic pedagogy of Confucianism is not what the classic texts literarily convey in terms of modern language lexicon; instead, the indigenous identity of Confucian pedagogy is to use language to “name the unspeakable and strives to withdraw itself to complete forgetfulness. What remains in terms of emptiness of symbolic meaning is the essence of pedagogic intelligibility” (Wu, 2011, p. 569). In other words, Confucianism is a heuristic; it creates a space for situational understanding, action, and interaction in order to approach the Way (Tao). As Tao De Jing states, “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way; the name that can be named is not the constant Name” (Lao-tzu). Only time can tell whether all above efforts will amount to the paradigm shift or historical transformation that Lior predicts in chapter 5. Nevertheless, Confucianism can, and should, advance with the times to keep pace with teaching and learning in current globalized classrooms, just as any other educational perspective does.

Ma (2014) encourages educational communities in the United States and China to learn about and from one another. It is certainly beyond the scope of this volume to take on that task, and some volumes already address this topic (e.g., Huang, 2014). However, “meeting on the middle ground” (i.e., following the Confucian “golden mean”), such as co-core synergy education practiced by Chinese-Americans for their children to become “hybrid tigers” (Huang, 2014), may help to bring out the best from both sides. Given the prevalence of Western theories and practices, the global community would benefit from exploring the Confucian ideal of harmonious society through dialogue with this non-Western cultural tradition.

In conclusion, the chapters of this volume not only enrich the literature on Confucianism from an interdisciplinary perspective, but they also offer valuable insights on why and how Confucianism is both relevant and important for teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Confucius's vision of education as empowerment is that one acquire wisdom and achieve self-fulfillment for social transformation, for peace, and for justice for all. This book is a small step on that thousand-mile-long journey.

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