

Confucian thinking in traditional moral education: key ideas and fundamental features

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Ancient Chinese ideas of moral education could be said to have five main dimensions – philosophical foundations, content, principles, methods and evaluation – which are described in this paper. An analysis of the fundamental features of Confucian thinking on moral education shows that it took the idea that human beings have a good and kind nature as its logical starting point. It built a system of ethical norms, based on the idea that an individual's feelings come from the inner mind, combined with external rites. Its methods of moral education are diverse, with an emphasis on learning from exemplars, environmental conditions and practice, as well as the cultivation of moral responsibility and social commitment. Its quintessential ideas were 'virtue lies in practice' and 'life is moral education'. The paper concludes by arguing that Confucian thinking on moral education has ongoing value for research and practice in contemporary moral education.

From the pre-Qin Period (6th–3rd century BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD), ancient Chinese society, with its long history, paid much attention to education. Indeed, from early times the idea that 'the first thing to build the country and the sovereign people is teaching and learning' was commonly believed by the Chinese people (Zhu, 1996, p. 545). Seen from a contemporary perspective, the main system of ancient Chinese education was moral education, with Confucianism as its main ideology. Confucian thinking has had profound and far-reaching influence on traditional Chinese culture. Confucian thinking is a complex set of ideas of moral, social and political teaching, built up by Confucius (551–479 BC) on ancient Chinese traditions. Confucian thinking developed into Confucianism which flourished and transformed Chinese society with its values, dominating it for centuries. There subsequently developed many schools of Confucianism such as Han Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Contemporary Neo-Confucianism and even forms of Confucianism in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Hawaii and much scholarship

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about Confucian texts. The Confucian ideas dealt with in this paper are usually regarded as closest to the roots of Confucianism.

Confucius laid great emphasis on moral education. Later followers and interpreters, such as Mencius (372–289 BC), the second great sage, made great contributions to the philosophy and practice of moral education.¹ Judging from the ancient codes and records, the disquisitions on moral education made by these great Confucians were not in a systematic form. They only had some isolated words and phrases for moral education, and their sayings seem to be scattered. But if one looks into the essence of such thoughts they were actually combined relatively systematically. The philosophy and teachings of Confucius were compiled, by his disciples and students, into *Lunyu [The analects]*, a book of many quotations. Though its structure seems loosely organized and merely ‘a collection of separate chapters, whose arrangement seems unreasonable; and there is no relation even between the closest chapters’ (Yang, 1980, p. 26), the consensus, amongst almost all contemporary Confucian scholars, is that, throughout *The analects*, Confucius constructed a relatively coherent system of educational thought.

In this paper I will set out and make brief comments on Confucian thinking about moral education according to five main dimensions – philosophical foundations, content, principles, methods, evaluation of morality – and analyse its fundamental features. Through this exposition I will show the ongoing relevance of Confucian thinking to contemporary moral education in China.

Philosophical foundations

As one of the important aspects of traditional Chinese culture, Confucian thinking on moral education had deep philosophical foundations. Three of its central tenets will be elaborated.

The doctrine that human beings are born good

The theory of human nature is the logical starting point of ancient Chinese ideas of moral education. The most important doctrine that influenced Chinese traditional culture in this respect is Mencius’s theory that human beings are born good. According to Mencius, everyone is born with four kinds of *potential* virtues – benevolence, righteousness, courteousness and wisdom – and it is these virtues which provide the basic starting point for every individual to arrive at the position of a sage with perfect morality. A person could become noble-minded if s/he were successful in developing these virtues, which are a necessary foundation for the formation and development of moral character. As Mencius said,

Whoever has no sense of compassion is not human; whoever has no sense of shame is not human; whoever has no sense of modesty is not human; and whoever has no sense of right and wrong is not human. The sense of compassion is the beginning of benevolence; the sense of shame the beginning of righteousness; the sense of modesty the beginning of courtesy; the sense of right and wrong the beginning of wisdom. Man possesses these four

beginnings just as he possesses four limbs ... If these are fully developed, he can protect the whole world; if not, he will not even be able to serve his parents. (Yang, 1960, p. 80)

The doctrine that human nature develops through habit

This doctrine about the development of human nature came originally from *Shangshu* (A collection of historical documents, usually translated as the *Book of records* or *Book of history*), which was a textbook for students of Confucius. It said that long practice makes habit second nature. This idea has been inherited by generations from Confucius onwards. As Confucius said, 'Men are close to one another by nature. It is the influence of environment that sets them wide apart.' (Yang, 1980, p. 181). 'If habit is cultivated when one is young it becomes like one's own nature, habit is then second nature.' (Wang, 1991, p. 61). In Chinese culture such sayings have become accepted truths. The doctrine about nature and habit is regarded as relatively scientific in understanding human psychological development because it did not ignore the influence of either heredity or environment on the human mind and behaviour. Human beings have only a few natural dispositions and, generally speaking, everyone has them, but there are various kinds of habitual natures and their potential development is infinite (Pan, 1984, pp. 401–405). Hence in Confucianism it is believed that human nature might be changed, but, relatively speaking, changing a young person's nature is much easier than changing that of an adult.

It must be pointed out that the doctrine that human beings are born good and the doctrine that human nature develops through practice in life and habit are not contradictory. According to Mencius, everyone is born with the *seeds* of the four virtues – benevolence, righteousness, courteousness and wisdom. A long period of cultivation and training is necessary if one wants to make these moral seeds grow into actual moral character. This involves learning and practice, that is, the environment and education. When the learning and practice are appropriate, one could become a moral person with a noble mind.

Regarding the importance of practice, a later Confucian, Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD) believed that moral practice did not mean that a person should carry out some specific behaviour for a special purpose, but that s/he should behave consistently and morally as a matter of course in daily life. Zhu Xi said,

People say that an ordinary man does not know how to practise moral behaviour. This is really nonsense. No matter whether a person speaks or not, and acts or not, everything is a potential opportunity for daily practice. Practising moral behaviour can be satisfactory when a person is vigilant, reflective and approaches practice with caution. It will not be satisfactory if a person practises moral behaviour leisurely. (Li, 1994, p. 222)

The doctrine that filial piety is the first among the virtues

This doctrine implies that natural family affection coming from the heart is the root of moral formation and development. This idea started with Confucius² and Mencius,³

and was later clearly set out in *The book of filial piety*, which many consider was inspired by Confucius and written by his disciples (Hu, 1996, pp. 2–4).

Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues and the fountainhead whence all moral teachings spring ... Our bodies – from a single hair to a bit of skin – are derived from our parents, we must not in the least injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. We establish ourselves in the world and are considered successful by cultivating virtues and observing morality, so as to leave a good name for posterity and to bring glory to our parents: this is the ultimate realm of filial piety. Hence filial piety begins with the service of our parents, proceeds to serve the emperor and is consummated in establishing ourselves in the world and achieving virtue and hence success. (Hu, 1996, p. 1)

For Confucius filial piety was the foundation of practising morality in order to fully realise *ren* [benevolence]. This kind of thinking has been revered so greatly in Chinese history that the old saying ‘Lewdness is the worst of all sins, and filial piety is the best of all goodness’ has become a pet phrase that everyone knows.

The content of moral education

Confucian moral education aims at a noble person who is characterized by superiority of mind, character, ideals or morals. Confucius insisted chiefly on the four virtues of sincerity, benevolence, filial piety and righteousness. It is often maintained that benevolence is the paramount virtue of Confucian teaching. Benevolence found its expression through the performance of *li* [rites, rituals and the social and political order]. The simplest definition of benevolence Confucius gave to his disciples was ‘Benevolence is to love all men’ (Yang, 1980, p. 131). He also said ‘Only a benevolent man is able to tell whom to love and whom to hate’ (Yang, 1980, p. 35). Benevolence was viewed as the characteristic trait of the noble person. Confucius put forward two principles in relation to being benevolent: ‘A benevolent man, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing success in everything for himself, he helps others succeed in everything, too.’ (Yang, 1980, p. 65) and ‘Do not do to others what you do not want yourself.’ (Yang, 1980, p. 166).

The teaching material of Confucian moral education is usually considered to be the *Four books* and the *Five classics* (and a more complicated collection entitled the *Twelve classics*). The *Four books* comprise *The analects of Confucius*, *Mencius*, *The great learning* and *The doctrine of the mean*. The *Five Classics* comprise *The book of history*, *The book of songs*, *The book of rites*, *The book of changes* and *The book of the spring and autumn annals*. All these works were compulsory reading for generations of scholars, and indirectly affected the whole of Chinese society by the end of Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century.

The main content of moral education in ancient Chinese societies is often summarized in the ideas of The Three Principle Relationships and the Five Constant Virtues. These were not directly stated by Confucius himself but construed by later Confucians, with the same aim of concentrating on learning how to govern, because they believed that education was primarily to consolidate and improve the prevailing social order and to ease conflicts between the ruler and the ruled. The idea of the

Three Principal Relationships originated with Han Fei, a philosopher of law, who lived about 280–33 BC. In the section of his book entitled *Loyalty and Filial Piety*, he said

The officials should serve the sovereign, the son should serve the father and the wife should serve the husband. The country will be ruled well if these three things are carried out smoothly. The country will be in disorder if these three things are not carried out well. This should be common practice and the great sovereign and virtuous officials should not change it. (Wang, 1998, p. 466)

Of all the ethics elaborated by Confucianism, these three ethical rules were specially chosen as the cardinal guides. They were further refined into the theory of the Three Principle Relationships in the *Baihutong* [*The general meaning of the conference at Baihu*]. In the chapter on The Three Principle Relationships and the Six Disciplines it says: ‘What do the so-called Three Principle Relationships mean? They mean that the monarch guides the subject, the father guides the son and the husband guides the wife.’ (Chen, 1994, p. 373). The meaning of the ‘monarch guides the subject’ is that both the mind and the body of a subject must belong to the emperor, and the same with the son in relationship to his father and the wife in relation to her husband. This idea of the Three Principal Relationships made the ancient Chinese people doubly restrained by ethics, both through the institution of the family and of the society. First of all it was a national ethic, that is, in such a feudalist society everyone had to be subordinate to the order of the emperor, and any behaviour of resistance to the emperor would be punished most seriously (often all the members of the family would be killed and sometimes even all the relatives would be killed). Secondly, it was a family ethic, which served the national ethic, as the ancient Chinese consistently insisted on the integration of the family and the nation, and they thought that a person who showed filial obedience in the family was also a person who was loyal to the nation.

The combined force of national ethic and family ethic was that in a feudal society only the emperor was independent and all other people were subject to his authority to different degrees. Since the individuality of a subject, a son and a wife was lost, and each had become an appendage of the emperor, a father, a husband, the result was that it was considered reasonable, as the common saying goes, ‘if the emperor wanted a subject to die, the subject had to die’ and ‘if a father asked a son to die, the son had to die’. The Three Principal Relationships were only concerned with absolute authority as such and did not say anything about their interpretation in practice. According to this unidirectional idea, an emperor, a father and a husband were the rulers of a subject, a son and a wife. No matter what kind of person the emperor, the father and the husband were, they each had the rights or power that these relationships gave them; their subjects, sons and wives had no rights, only the obligation of unconditional obedience. This idea, which with the gradual strengthening of the feudal aristocracy in the West Han Dynasty (207BC–25 AD) had become a core part of moral education, was called ‘the Confucian ethical code’ (Feng, 1985, p. 75). It suppressed the relative and natural relationship of ethics, advocated by the Confucians in the pre-Qin Dynasty, by which everyone has a duty and responsibility

to others differentially according to their position. Deeply influenced by the Three Principal Relationships, the concept of the individual person cannot be found in Chinese culture until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). This may be considered the most serious error and legacy of Confucian thinking in relation to moral education.

The Five Constant Virtues are benevolence, righteousness, courteousness, wisdom and honesty. Initially, as Five Moral Conducts they were attributed to Confucius and Mencius, and subsequently they were promoted as the Five Constant Virtues in the book *The general meaning of the conference at Baihu*, which was passed down by the ancient Chinese through various dynasties. What then are the Five Constant Virtues? In the chapter on Character and Feelings in this book it says:

The benevolent man is not hardhearted and he can love life and other people. The righteous man chooses to do things in a just and right way. The courteous man has good manners and, by being courteous, develops etiquette through long practice. The wise man knows clearly if he has some independent understanding of the ideas of the great thinkers; then he will never be puzzled about present matters, and he can find out many important things and can have deep insight through some trivial matters. The honest man is trustworthy and loyal and never betrays anyone. (Chen, 1994, p. 381)

Confucius emphasized matching words to deeds to such an extent that he regarded it as an important standard of judging ‘a noble person’ and ‘a mean person’. He loathed a ‘mean person’, who says a lot but actually does very little. When he was asked how to be a noble person, Confucius said, ‘Let his deeds come before his words.’ (Yang, 1980, p. 17). This means a noble person should act before he speaks, and then explain his action. In short, the Confucian thinkers regarded ‘practice’ as the main method of moral education and as both the starting point and the end point of moral education. By repeated practice moral behaviour would be strengthened and the effect of moral education would be heightened.

The principles of moral education

In order to implement moral education in a correct and effective way, at least four principles were posited in Confucian moral education. These continue to have significance as reference points even now. The purpose of the four principles was to guide people in the practice of moral education from different perspectives.

Giving positive moral education from early childhood

This means that an individual should experience a coherent, positive moral education⁴ when young, so that good habits of conduct could be cultivated from early childhood and bad conduct could be eliminated. This idea can at least be traced back to *I ching [The book of changes]*, generally thought to have been written in the Zhou Dynasty (1066–256 BC). In this book it is said ‘The purpose of enlightenment is to cultivate a good character in the child, this is great work.’ (Zhou, 1991, p.25). This kind of thought was inherited and elaborated upon by later generations. For

instance, Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544 AD), a Confucian in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD), said in his book, *Ya shu*, about Confucianism

The innocent child has no preconceived distracting thoughts and can easily accept positive moral education. Such an education could make a person have positive moral character⁵ and should be seen as great work. When a person grows up, different kinds of habits are formed. Even if a person is guided by positive education, s/he will still approach things with preconceived ideas. Such ideas have been fixed and can not be eradicated. How could they be transformed into positive ideas? Therefore, positive education should begin in innocent childhood. (Quoted in Yan, 1989, pp. 293–294)

As far as children were concerned, the ancient Confucians recommended that behavioural training should start from their earliest years in daily life. For example, Zhu Xi proposed that the moral education of young children should

Teach them the way of sweeping the courtyard, of dealing with things and the ways of getting along with people, and also teach them the rituals of loving their families, of respecting their parents, of holding their teachers in esteem and being on intimate terms with their friends. If all these are to be made the foundation of a person's education, a husband's regulation of his family, a sovereign's ruling of his state and having a peaceful universe they must be taught to young children and they should be made to practise them. (Yan, 1989, p. 142)

Special attention was paid to the moral education of children at home. Such textbooks as *Notes on the Book of Filial Piety* (Hu, 1996), *The family teachings of Yan Zhitui* (Yan, 1992), *The explanation of the Book of Three-Word Sentences* (Wang, Y. L., 1991) and *The book of a thousand words* (Zhou, 1990), were widely used to promote and interpret Confucian moral thinking for children before they received more formal education.

Preventing a fault before it happens

As it says in *The Ideas of Learning*, a chapter in *The book of rites*: 'The fundamental ideas of *The Great Learning* are to prevent a fault before it happens.' (Zhu, 1996, p. 551). The Confucian thinkers advocated the idea of prevention first in moral education. This was thought to be reasonable because it would be much better if a bad habit could be avoided before it was formed in a child, rather than trying to deal with it later as it would be more difficult to overcome such a bad habit after it had been formed.

Proceeding in an orderly way and step by step

Seeing that the development of an individual's body and mind has a certain order and follows some stages, most of the Confucian thinkers asserted that the moral education of an individual should comply with the principle of proceeding in an orderly way and step by step. The story, known by all Chinese, of 'trying to help the shoots grow by pulling them upward' (Yang, 1960, p. 62) follows this reasoning. It is also said in *The collected works of the two Chengs* (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi)

An excellent teacher teaches people in a certain order. S/he firstly passes on what is simple and easy to learn, and then what is more complicated and difficult to learn, but s/he does not just pass on easy and simple knowledge without later teaching difficult and complicated knowledge. (Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p. 102)

Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude

The ancient Chinese people were usually aware of differential individual development of the body and mind and thus they asserted that moral education should follow the principle of teaching a student in accordance with aptitude and personal characteristics. For example, it was recorded in *The analects* that:

Zhongyou asked Confucius: 'Shall I immediately put into practice what I have just been told is right?'

Confucius said: 'While your father and older brother are still alive, how can you immediately put into practice what you have just been told is right?'

Ran Qiu asked Confucius: 'Shall I immediately put into practice what I have just been told is right?'

Confucius said: 'Put into practice immediately what you have just heard is right.'

Then Gongxi Hua said: 'When Zhongyou asked you whether he should immediately put into practice what he had just been told is right, you said that since his father and older brother were still alive, he could not do so; when Ran Qiu asked you whether he should immediately carry into practice what he had just been told is right, you said: "immediately". I am really perplexed about the difference between your answers and I venture to ask you for an explanation.'

Confucius said: 'Ran Qiu is timid and too cautious in his conduct, and therefore I meant to encourage him; Zhongyou is over confident, and therefore I meant to hold him back. (Yang, 1960, p. 117)

In order to achieve all these principles, it was stressed that individuals, families, schools and society should commit to moral education together throughout daily life. The ancient Confucian thinkers always thought that 'virtue lies in practice'. Thus, in terms of actual moral education the Confucians usually started from moral practice and recommended the integration of good moral practices into daily life, so that some good habits of moral behaviour would be formed. As recorded in *The analects*, Confucius, encouraging his disciples to practise moral behaviour in their daily lives, required that

Young people should be filial to their parents at home and polite and respectful to their elders in society. They should be guarded in their speech and truthful in what they say. While constantly keeping on good terms with all, they should foster closer ties with kind hearted men. If all this is carried out, and if they still have energy to spare, they should engage themselves in studying the literature handed down from the ancient thinkers. (Yang, 1960, pp. 4-5)

Methods of moral education

According to the characteristics of an individual's physical and mental development

and the nature of moral education as a discipline, many methods of moral education were developed in ancient China, five of which are described below.

The method of unconscious influence

Some of the Confucian educators (such as Confucius, Mencius, Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan and so on⁶) discovered the distinctiveness of moral education: because it is different from instruction and because of the long-term nature of the process it is not easy to see its effect quickly. Confucius and his followers thought that moral education did not wholly depend on the instruction of knowledge, and thus they usually emphasized the role played by the teacher's example and the uplifting influence of environment in developing one's morality. For example, Confucius once said: 'The gentleman's morality may be compared to the wind, and the mean spirited man's morality to the grass. Under the force of the wind the grass will certainly bend in the direction of the wind.' (Yang, 1980, p. 129). This indicates the role played by example. Indicating the role of environment Confucius also said, 'It is indeed a privilege to live in a neighbourhood where humanity prevails. If a man does not insist on such an environment when selecting his residence, how can he be counted as being wise?' (Yang, 1980, p. 34). The essence of the two methods could be described as 'unconscious influence' or the influence of ethos or atmosphere. This method was based in human 'psychology', it worked by exerting a subtle influence on a person's character and once it had an impact it could have a deep and enduring effect on a person's thinking, behaviour and temperament.

The method of affective education

This means that a teacher should choose an appropriate method of moral education according to the interests, character and temperament of the learners in order to promote their moral development. As Wang Shouren (1472–1528 AD), a scholar, official and military officer in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD), said in his *Lectures on instructing and learning knowledge and skills*,

To teach a child, one must teach according to the pupil's interest and preference and make the pupil feel that learning is really an enjoyable thing and have the right attitude to learning. It is something like the growth of grass and trees: they can grow naturally very quickly if they can often absorb the moisture of rain; otherwise they will wither and not do well, and, finally, if they are always covered by frost and ice, they will shrivel up and die. (Wang, 1996, p. 90)

The method of developing awareness and insight

From the perspective of the learner, the main characteristics of the traditional Chinese methods of moral education lie in their emphasis on the development of awareness and insight instead of memorization and recitation. As Ban Gu (32–92 AD) in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) said: 'Learning is to be aware of what one could learn

which one does not yet know.’ (Chen, 1994, p. 254). There are mainly two types of awareness: the first is ‘to respect morality’; the second is ‘to seek for knowledge’. As Zhu Xi (1130–1200) said in his *Notes on the chapters and sentences of the Four Great Books*,

To respect morality requires that one should first find out about one’s moral self. When one finds out about one’s moral self one will naturally know the reasons for everything, so that one could suddenly be enlightened about everything. To seek for knowledge requires that one must study the phenomena of nature in order to acquire the reasons for being a human being, so that one can find one’s moral self. (Zhu, 1983, pp. 35–36)

Of these ways of cultivating one’s virtue, the essence of the former seems to resemble the contemporary idea of sudden insight and the essence of the latter resembles gradual enlightenment and understanding.

The method of emphasizing self-cultivation

The method of self-cultivation is an important feature of traditional Chinese culture. This involves four main approaches: having few desires; awakening one’s conscience; raising one’s sense of shame; and being strict with oneself, even when one is alone.

Having few desires refers to achieving morality by limiting or controlling desires. Some of the great thinkers thought bad desires disturbed the conscience and were the source of immoral behaviour or that desire could disturb cognitive functioning, so as to make it biased or mistaken (Luo, 1995, p. 275). The method of having few desires can be illustrated by two examples. In *The analects*, Confucius said: ‘Do not look at what is contrary to courteousness; do not listen to what is contrary to courteousness; do not speak what is contrary to courteousness, and do not do what is contrary to courteousness.’ (Yang, 1980, p. 123). These four ‘do-nots’ were adopted as a moral code to control desires.

Awakening one’s conscience is a way of developing one’s intuition. As Wang Shouren said,

A person who listens to his conscience is wise and virtuous. The learning of the wise and virtuous person lies in developing the conscience. The person who develops his conscience naturally is wise and virtuous; the person who develops it due to his own effort is a person of virtue; the person who does not listen to his conscience and does not develop it is an ignorant person. But even a very ignorant person is still aware of his conscience. If s/he could develop his conscience, then there would be no difference between him/her and the wise and virtuous person. And therefore both the wise and virtuous person and the ignorant person have the same potential conscience. ... There is no other learning in moral education besides developing the conscience. (Wang, 1996, p. 921)

Raising awareness of one’s sense of shame refers to fostering in a person an awareness of error in speech and action, and a feeling of disgrace because of having done something contrary to conscience or behaviour, or a sense of self-blame brought on by the condemnation of others. Only by feeling shame could one do what he should do and not do what he should not do. If one had no sense of shame one would do things

that offended public decency. And therefore a sense of shame was regarded as ‘the bottom line’ for a human being. Just as Mencius said, ‘Whoever has no sense of shame is not human.’ (Yang, 1960, p. 80). This thought deeply influenced the ancient Chinese in every dynasty and may have influenced the continuing concern of Chinese people with face-saving in order to retain a sense of shame.

Being strict with oneself even when alone means that a person should not behave counter to morality and justice, neither in thinking nor in behaviour. The earliest version of the method came from *The book of rites* where both The Doctrine of the Mean and The Great Learning said: ‘So a noble person is self-critical when alone.’ (Zhu, 1996, p. 772, 866). Being strict with oneself is not only a way of moral self-cultivation but also represents the attainment of a high level of moral development, as shown in the case of Yang Zhen, who lived during the East Han Dynasty (25–220 AD):

Yang Zhen was transferred to other posts, as an official in Jing Zhou and an official in Dong Lai [a county in Jing Zhou]. On the way to his posts he passed through Changyi. It happened that Wang Mi, head of Changyi County, was Yang Zhen’s former student, who was recommended for this official position by Yang Zhen. When Wang Mi learned that his old teacher would pass through Changyi he paid a visit to Yang Zhen late at night in his hotel, taking a pot of gold, in order to repay a debt of gratitude. But Yang Zhen refused Wang Mi’s gift. Wang Mi said that it was late at night, no one would know anything about it, and urged Yang Zhen to accept the gift. Yang Zhen answered that “Heaven knows, the gods know, I know and you know. How could you say that no one knows anything about it?” On hearing this, Wang Mi felt ashamed and went away. (Fan, 1965, p. 1760)

The method of practice

Another fundamental idea, in which the Chinese have consistently believed, is that ‘virtue lies in practice’.⁷ As it said in *The Zhou book of changes*, ‘Therefore practice is the foundation of morality.’ (Zhou, 1991, p. 267). Practice was regarded as the foundation of morality because whether one was a moral person was not determined by how much moral knowledge one had mastered, but by whether one could put it into practice, earnestly and sincerely, in accordance with certain objective moral standards, not simply imitating some moral behaviour. Mencius advocated that as long as anyone acted steadily, with effort, according to Confucian moral standards, he could become a wise and virtuous man. This also implies that ‘virtue lies in practice’. It is also said more clearly in *The book of rites*, ‘A person is approaching benevolence as long as he tries his best in practice.’ (Zhu, 1996, p. 776). Zhu Xi said,

The good is out there, I myself put it into practice. By doing so for a long time it can become integrated with myself; having an integrated personality will be my achievement. If I do not put it into practice, then the good remains good out there and I am still just I. (Li, 1994, p. 222)

‘The good is out there’ is a matter of knowledge, and ‘I myself put it into practice’ is a matter of behaviour. Only when a person knows it can he then do it ‘for a long time’, and achieve a moral character. Then the good could become integrated with ‘myself’,

and realize my inner character. Thus the idea that ‘virtue lies in practice’ also involved an enrichment of mind as well as behaviour.

Moreover, the thought that ‘virtue lies in practice’ can be seen in the definition of morality. What is ‘morality’? The great thinkers of the past usually believed that morality is a precondition of and integral to being a person. According to *The book of rites*, morality, or virtue, is a gain, beneficial to the person (Zhu, 1996, p. 562). Influenced by this thought, many Confucians advocated the cultivation of morality through practice, so as to make objective moral standards into subjective motivation. They believed that moral education could not be counted as effective unless a person put morality into practice. Wang Shouren also said,

The whole process of learning, such as studying, asking, thinking and debating, is a matter of practice; any kind of learning cannot do without practice. For example, in learning filial piety, a child has to wait upon his parents genuinely and sincerely. Only by practising filial piety can it be counted as learning filial piety. If someone only speaks about how to be filial but does not practise it, that is not complete learning of filial piety. ... All the moral education in the world can not be counted as moral education without practice and the beginning of moral education starts with practice. (Wang, 1996, p. 48)

The method of practice aims at enhancing the moral character of the learners through the training of their conduct. Practice is both the starting point and the end point of cultivating one’s moral character. A person should demonstrate that s/he means what s/he says by doing it in practice. ‘Virtue lies in practice’ can be seen as one of the most important ideas of moral education in traditional Chinese culture.

Evaluation of morality

From early times the ancient Chinese recognized the importance of understanding others. As *The book of history*, one of the most ancient works in China, noted, ‘Only a wise sovereign can fully understand his subordinates and appoint them to appropriate positions.’ (Jiang & Qian, 1990, p. 50). If a person who governs must be good at knowing others in order to discover able people and appoint them to suitable posts, then only on the basis of knowing others can a teacher be good at teaching others, according to their abilities and aptitudes. In addition, the Confucian thinkers considered that a person’s character was influenced, to a large extent, by those with whom s/he associated, and they therefore asserted that one should be careful with whom one makes friends. As Confucius said,

There are three kinds of people who can be your helpful friends and there are also three kinds of people who can be your harmful friends. Friends who are upright and honest, friends who are sincere and truthful and friends who are learned and informed can be helpful to you. Friends who are in the habit of flattery, friends who are capable of feigning compliance and friends who are boastful and have a glib tongue can be harmful to you. (Yang, 1980, p. 175)

Such a way of thinking has persisted, so that Chinese people have consistently believed that a person’s judgement about others could be tested. Moreover, the Confucian tradition has always put ethics and morality at its centre and so people

consider a person's moral attitudes and behaviour as a priority when they begin to know a person. Therefore, the Chinese have paid particular attention to moral evaluation from ancient times to the present. The ancient Chinese used two main methods: evaluation by others and self-evaluation.

Evaluation by others

This refers to the means that any person could use to evaluate the moral character of others. Such an evaluation usually comprised three methods:

1. *The method of examining a person's language and observing conduct.* As Confucius said in *The analects*, 'Now I listen to what they say and, at the same time, watch what they do.' (Yang, 1980, p. 45).

2. *The method of discernment by questions and answers.* This is the method of testing a person's moral character by asking some questions and seeing how they are answered. Wang Shouren, a moral educator, described what he required of his students:

Everyday, early in the morning, when all the students pay their respect to the teacher, I, myself, would ask each of them, in the following order: whether he is slack in loving his parents and respecting his elders at home, or whether he loves his parents and elders wholeheartedly; whether he gives his best wishes to his parents every morning and evening, and asks about his parents' health; whether his words and conduct conform to convention or show unconventionality, and whether he can treat others with caution when he sets out to communicate with them; whether he is fraudulent, presumptuous and evil in all his words and conduct, or whether he can be loyal, honest and respectful in all his doings. Each of the students must give a matter-of-fact answer to these questions asked by the teacher in order to correct any mistakes and maintain a good record if mistakes have been committed. (Wang, 1996, p. 91)

3. *The method of the quasi-situational test.* This aims to design an unusual situation in which the subject's conduct can be observed, so that moral character can be tested. Sixteen examples of such tests are given in *Textual research on the implications of The Book of Rites*, edited by Da Dai:

to check on what a person has done in order to examine how credible s/he is; to ask a person to answer questions by concentrating on the main points in order to examine her/his intellectual level; to put a person into a difficult situation in order to examine whether or not s/he is brave; to ask a person to deal with diverse and complicated affairs in order to observe her/his working ability; to give a person plenty of opportunities to have good prospects of gain in order to observe whether or not s/he is greedy; to make a person listen to demoralizing music in order to observe whether or not s/he could exercise self-control so as to protect her/himself from immorality; to allow a person to obtain plenty of things that s/he likes in order to observe whether or not s/he is frivolous; to make a person lose her/his temper intentionally without any reason in order to observe whether or not s/he is

steady; to make a person drunk in order to observe whether or not her/his speech and conduct are indiscreet; to give a person opportunities to do things freely in order to observe whether or not her/his behaviour conforms with conventional behaviour; to send a person a long way away to do some business in order to observe whether or not s/he could be loyal to her/his position; to arrange for a person to do things near at hand in order to observe whether or not s/he is diligent; to try to understand a person's aspirations in order to observe her/his temperament; to examine a person's pattern of behaviour in order to see whether or not s/he is honest; to suggest that a person do something in order to observe carefully her/his attitude to affairs; and to look quietly and secretly at a person's behaviour in order to observe whether or not s/he is mature. (Wang, 1983, p. 188)

These methods have a clear purpose, are quite exquisite in their design, and they have an intimate relationship with daily life. Most of these methods had no rigid control of the other related conditions, but of these sixteen methods, the third, fifth, ninth and tenth are sufficiently precise as to be able to evaluate an individual's moral character to some extent. Yet compared with modern situational tests, they could only be considered quasi-situational tests.

Self-evaluation

The ancient Chinese also recognized that the human heart is more fickle than perilous mountains and rivers, and to know one's mind is more difficult than to know the universe. Although it is difficult to give both an accurate evaluation of another person's and one's own moral character, the Confucian thinkers held self-knowledge in great esteem. Lao Tzu also said, 'He who knows others is clever he who knows himself is wise.' (Chen, 1984, p.198). The Confucians advocated self-evaluation, a method by which a person considers her/his own moral integrity by self-examination. This method can be divided into two parts – introspection and comparative self-appraisal – which require examination of conscience and self-discipline.

1. *The method of introspection.* This is a way of appraising one's own moral character by reflection on oneself. According to the record in *The analects*, one of Confucius's disciples, Zeng Shen, said,

Everyday I make several self-examinations on the following points: as to whether I have or have not exerted myself to my utmost in helping others; whether I have or have not been honest and sincere in intercourse with friends; whether I have or have not practised the instructions of my teacher. (Yang, 1980, p.3)

2. *The method of comparative self-appraisal.* This refers to the method of self-observation by comparing oneself with one's observation of others. As Confucius said, 'When you meet a virtuous man, try to follow his example; when you meet an immoral man, try to examine yourself inwardly.' (Yang, 1980, p. 39). Both the virtuous man and the immoral man are external standards of reference by which an individual can examine himself; a person should examine the correspondence

between her or his own words and conduct and those of exemplars, to find out whether s/he has the merits of a virtuous person or whether s/he has the faults of an immoral person.

Overview and conclusions

In conclusion I should like to draw out, from the key ideas and fundamental features described, five main themes for further comment and to relate them to contemporary moral education in China.

1. Confucian thinking on moral education took the doctrine that the human heart is naturally good as its starting point and assumed the goodness of human nature. Most Confucians thought that the key to cultivating morality did not depend on the inculcation of specific socio-moral norms and behavioural rules, but on the awakening of enlightenment, the development of conscience and of natural goodness, so that, through practice, the moral sense could be easily aroused and brought to bear in action. However, there is some dissention among contemporary Confucian scholars about the theory that the human heart is naturally good. Indeed, if there is such a reliance on innate potential for good in order to cultivate moral character then the function of formal methods of moral education in providing value guidance beneficial to moral growth seems to be limited. Furthermore, if moral education excessively emphasizes self-development, it might make a person separate the improvement of her/his mind from the pursuit of other normal goals in life. Therefore a complete way of cultivating morality should be through the organic integration of self-development and moral education given by others in practice, without giving one aspect more weight at the expense of the other.

2. Confucianism built its moral system of ethical standards on an individual's affection, coming from the inner mind. Its merit is that it also aimed to unify an individual's self-improvement, family education, moral education by others and social learning, thereby making morality a cohesive system of mutual interaction (Chen & Zhu, 1998, p. 22–26). However, the demerits of emphasizing affective morality are also very clear. Such a morality usually depends on the strength of an individual's private feelings and so can remain mainly a personal morality. Such Confucian influences actually led to a lack of public morality in ancient China. As a result of such a tradition it may be more difficult in contemporary life to find such public moral concepts as universal justice and love (as opposed to justice and love for one's own family and people considered to be one's own side). So, in order to enhance the effectiveness of contemporary Chinese moral education, there is a need to build on the Confucian moral system of ethical standards by imposing appropriate limitations on the relationship of morality and an individual's natural affection and enhancing the link between morality and an individual's social affection, in order to further develop from a private morality to a public morality. This would be a fundamental change for contemporary Chinese moral education.

3. Confucianism emphasized such methods as exemplars, environmental influences and practice to change and improve moral character through the long nurturing of

daily life. Such methods are still worthy of reference and use and are thought to be effective in moral education. In fact Confucianism involved some principles and methods of cultivating morality that are in accordance with mental development. In consequence such feudal ethical thought came to be deeply rooted in the hearts of the ancient Chinese, though not always to good effect. Seen from a contemporary perspective, however, Confucian moral education had some biases in its content, such as the Three Cardinal Principles and the idea of unidirectional filial piety, requiring children to show filial piety irrespective of whether their parents were right or wrong. This should merit the attention of contemporary moral educators in China.

4. 'Life is moral education' was the quintessential idea in ancient Chinese Confucian thinking on moral education. The virtues were to be cultivated by unconscious influence, affective education, mental development and, above all, practice. The Confucians believed that life is both the most important medium and the means of improving one's moral character, and the end result and final purpose of developing one's morality. This is linked with two ideas stressed by contemporary moral education: that moral education should teach an individual to 'be an upright person', and of 'learning to be', that is learning from social life.

5. Another important idea and notable feature of ancient Confucian thinking on moral education is that of cultivating one's moral character through such methods as unconscious influence, developing the conscience, trying hard to practise and being strict with oneself. Confucianism was concerned with reaching the same goal of developing moral character by different routes. In contemporary terms this would relate to the view in moral education that a student should 'learn to learn' and 'learn to choose'. In the past Chinese students did not know how to learn, but learned according to what their teachers told them, and they did not know how to make their own choices, but chose according to their teachers' advice. Nowadays moral education emphasizes that children should learn how to learn, make their own judgements, and their own choices according to their own needs.

From a contemporary perspective, Confucian thinking on moral education continues to have value and relevance in at least in two respects. First, it has theoretical value. The idea that 'virtue lies in practice' can counteract the previous overemphasis on the idea that 'virtue is knowledge', so as to make the relationship between knowledge, practice and virtue more consistent. The idea that 'long practice makes second nature' can remedy the deficiencies of the theories of genetic and environmental determinism, so as to facilitate a more precise understanding of the effect of heredity, environment and subjectivity on the formation and development of morality, and to acknowledge more explicitly the importance of habit cultivated when young. The idea that 'life is moral education' can compensate for the shortcomings of the present exclusive emphasis on school-based moral education without paying much attention to other forms of moral education. It can provide some theoretical basis for contemporary Chinese moral education, which should move away from only emphasizing the effect of school moral education to an integrated moral education by individual cultivation of the mind, family moral education, school moral education and social moral teachings. Since school is just one stage of an individual's whole life,

it makes for a fragmented moral education if only school-based moral education is emphasized at the expense of lifelong moral education.

Secondly, Confucian thinking on moral education continues to have practical value. Confucian scholars proposed useful models and methods for cultivating morality, and they developed several convenient and feasible methods to evaluate morality. Confucian thinking about moral education could provide some effective models and methods for developing and evaluating morality in contemporary Chinese moral education. If policy makers and curriculum developers nowadays were to consider and reflect on these carefully they could surely make use of them in the current reform of moral education. Confucian thinking could also enhance the theorizing of moral education, serving to influence the lack of distinctive features, both in academic research and educational practice, in modern Chinese moral education. If contemporary globally oriented Chinese moral education wants to recognize and not to destroy its 'roots', it should connect with ancient Chinese Confucian thinking on moral education, because only when it 'has deep roots' can it have 'luxuriant leaves'.

Notes

1. Other Confucians who might be mentioned include: Mencius (c. 372–289 BC) and Xun Zi (c. 313–238 BC) in the Warring States Period (475–221 BC); Dong Zhongshu (c. 176–104 BC) in the Xihan Dynasty (206 BC–23 AD); Cheng Hao (1032–1085 AD), Cheng Yi (1033–1107 AD), Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD) and Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1193 AD) in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD); Wang Shouren (1472–1528 AD) in the Ming Dynasty; and Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692 AD) in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).
2. You Zi, a close student of Confucius, once said: 'So filial piety and respect and love for one's older brothers are the fundamental principles of humanity, aren't they?' (Yang, 1980, p.2). Although this was said by You Zi, this could be regarded as the result of the influence of Confucius, and as one of his thoughts. Confucius paid consistent attention to filial piety, and this shows that the idea that filial piety is a basis of morality originated from Confucius.
3. Mencius said, 'The essence of benevolence is to serve one's parents; the essence of righteousness is to obey one's older brothers; the essence of wisdom is to know these two and adhere to them ...' (Yang, 1960 p.183). 'Serve one's parents' and 'obey one's older brothers' are both indicators of filial piety, and this shows that Mencius also had the idea that filial piety is the foundation of morality.
4. For example, to develop a moral character of honesty, a child should be taught from a very young age to get along with people in an honest way, and to always act in this way. The teacher can never require that the child treat others in an honest way today and then ask the child to cheat people tomorrow. If the teacher genuinely and consistently teaches the child in an honest way it would amount to a positive and coherent education. Positive education involves role models and educating with an 'intention towards goodness'.
5. This refers to the five virtues of benevolence, righteousness, courteousness, wisdom and honesty.
6. For example, Confucius said: 'Suppose that a man is well read in *Shijing* [*The book of songs*], but is not proficient in the government work he is entrusted with, nor can he handle diplomatic affairs independently when he is sent on a mission to another state; even though he has read a great deal, what is the good of that?' (Yang, 1980, p.181). It is also said in the 48th chapter of *Laozi* [*Lao Tzu*], 'If one pursues knowledge too inflexibly then the more knowledge

he learns the less he develops morally.’ (Chen, 1984, p. 250). Lu Jiuyuan said in his *Quotations, II*: ‘Nowadays a person who is a bit arrogant just likes to show off his knowledge, but his knowledge does not help him to be a better person. Even if I do not know one word I could still be a good human being.’ (Lu, 1980, p. 447). This shows that the Confucian thinkers discovered that one of the important characteristics of virtue is ‘practice’, and that moral knowledge is mainly acquired through one’s experience and consciousness of one’s own moral life, not by moralizing. The great thinkers of the past usually emphasized the importance of ‘practice’ (accepting influence is just one of the ‘practices’) for moral development and they also differentiated knowledge from virtue, as they clearly realized that growth in an individual’s knowledge did not always promote, and sometimes even hindered, the development of moral character.

7. ‘Practice’ means that a person conducts him or her self according to certain moral principles approved by Confucianism. Practice had two levels: practice at a lower level, mainly by children behaving according to adults’ teachings or by imitating them; practice at a higher level, mainly by adults conducting themselves earnestly and sincerely, according to a certain set of moral principles in their daily lives. Most Confucians thought that practice was a way for people to do small things in their daily lives as well as possible, in order to become moral, but practice did not mean people should specifically and consciously do one kind of thing rather than another.

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