

Confucius' Thoughts on Moral Education in China

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Abstract

Confucius was the greatest philosopher and educator in Chinese history. His words and thoughts were recorded in the book *The Analects of Confucius* by his disciples. This paper mainly introduces Confucius' thoughts on moral education from three aspects: goal, main contents, and teaching methods. According to Confucius, cultivating a completely virtuous person ('Junzi') is the goal of moral education. The idea of benevolence ('Ren') is regarded as the core of Confucius' moral thoughts and the idea of etiquette ('Li') is the external form of 'Ren'. Both of them are main contents of Confucius' moral education. There are several teaching methods in Confucius' moral education, such as self-cultivating, individual instruction, enlightening and practice, which are described in this paper. Furthermore, some inspirations which are obtained from Confucius' moral educational thoughts provide significant reference for contemporary education in China.

Key words: Confucius' thoughts; Moral education; Junzi; Ren; Li

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Confucius was born in the state of Lu (today, Shan Dong province in China) in 551 BC and died in 479 BC. He was the sage of ancient China and the greatest philosopher. He also was a thinker, political figure, educator, teacher and founder of the RU School of Chinese thoughts. His teaching formed the foundation of much of subsequent Chinese thoughts of the education

and comportment of the ideal man. *The Analects of Confucius* is considered to be the most authentic and reliable composition of Confucius in which the reflection of his utmost thoughts and philosophy is evidence. It is a volume consisting of notes and journals on Confucius' saying and activities kept by the disciples and put together after his death. The philosophy and thoughts of Confucius and his followers had been known as Confucianism, which was considered to be the most influenced doctrine in the history of China. The doctrine has greatly influenced the Chinese thoughts and ideas in education, society, administration, governance, and behavior of individuals. Needless to say, Confucius is regarded as the spiritual ancestor of later teachers, historian, moral philosophers, literary scholars and countless others. His lives and works figured prominently in intellectual history of China. His outstanding contribution is obviously marked in the history of human thought and civilization.

Confucius emphasized on the moral values to establish a disciplined and stable society while there was prevailing a chaotic condition in social and political life of China. He introduced the concept of a moral state and a disciplined society. The moral theory is the center of Confucius' philosophy, which is the most important part of the Confucianism. Confucius thought highly on moral education in his teaching. Cultivating persons who were high qualified and virtuous was the main aim of his education. Confucius instructed his students that they should pursue 'the truth' and 'moral integrity' during all their life. And he viewed that moral education was beneficial for individual improvement, and could facilitate the development of society and the nation. Furthermore, Confucius indicated that virtues were not acquired innately, but developed through teaching and training. Confucius proposed a viewpoint 'By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 17, chapter 2) So, Confucius emphasized on moral education and cultivation of human

beings to gain virtues with learning. Confucius' moral education thoughts have important practical significance for contemporary education. Chinese educators should inherit Confucius' moral education thoughts and carry on it into the education practice. Confucius' moral education thoughts even might be used for reference by other educators in the world.

1. THE GOAL OF MORAL EDUCATION

The goal of Confucius' moral education is to help each person improve moral characters and behaviors to become a completely virtuous person, and perhaps prepare to get an official position in the government to be a moral governor.

Confucius believed that national governor should manage country by means of his virtues not by national decree and punishment, so that people would like to support him. Confucius said, 'The governor who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 2, chapter 1). Confucius asserted that governors should have moral qualities and virtues; they should manage and influence the people using moral education and courtesy to guide people's behaviors. Confucius said, 'If the people are led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, and have no sense of shame; If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 2, chapter 3) Confucius indicated that only the 'Junzi' could manage the people by mean of moral and virtues. Therefore, the ultimate aim of Confucius' moral education is to cultivate 'Junzi'(君子) who is an ethical and capable person and could undertake historical mission for benefiting society and the nation. Confucius hoped such kind of person to be a moral governor and put virtues into political practice.

The term 'Junzi' originally referred to 'a member of the upper class'. Confucius used this term extensively to mean a person of virtue and principle (Cheng, 2010). *The Analects of Confucius* appears to be the earliest work in which 'Junzi' was used to imply high moral standards in a person. 'Here it denotes the ideal man whom all men should cultivate their characters to imitate; such a man, noble in virtue, was not necessarily a noble in social status.' (Hsu, 1965, p.161) The common translation of 'Junzi' is 'superior man', 'perfect man', or 'gentleman'. In this paper, 'superior man' would be used, with meaning of a person of complete or great virtue.

In *the Analects of Confucius*, there are many descriptions about 'Junzi'. For example, 'Someone who aims to be a man of complete virtue in his food does not seek to gratify his appetite, nor in his dwelling place

does he seek the appliances of ease; he is earnest in what he is doing, and careful in his speech; he frequently companies with men of principle that he may be rectified---such a person may be said indeed to love to learn.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 14). 'Junzi' behaves properly and elegantly, as Confucius saying 'the person with virtue in authority is beneficent without great expenditure; he lays tasks on the people without their repining; he pursues what he desires without being covetous; he maintains a dignified ease without being proud; he is majestic without being fierce.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 20, chapter 2). Confucius denoted that 'Junzi' should at least had basic these characters: 'holds faithfulness and sincerity as first principles; if the scholar be not grave, he will not call forth any veneration, and his learning will not be solid; has friends equal to himself; when he has faults, does not fear to abandon them' (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 8). A superior man should be faithful and sincere, look to be dignified and grave, love to study, have many friends and correct his faults initiatively. More importantly, superior man must have the virtue of 'Ren'. Confucius said, 'If a superior man abandons virtue, how can he fulfill the requirements of that name? The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 4, chapter 5) Confucius viewed the virtue of 'Ren' to be the most important character of 'Junzi' (superior man) and the core of moral education.

2. THE MAIN CONTENTS OF MORAL EDUCATION

Confucius' moral education aimed at a 'Junzi' who was characterized by superiority of mind, virtues, ideals and moral. To cultivate one to be such noble virtuous person, he should learn many virtues: sincerity, benevolence, filial piety, righteousness, integrity, forgiveness, courage and so on. Confucius regarded benevolence as the paramount virtue, which was called 'Ren'. Benevolence was expressed through much propriety, which was called 'Li', being behavior rule and ceremony. 'Ren' and 'Li' were the main contents of Confucius' moral education.

2.1 'Ren'(benevolence): The Core of Moral Education

Of all the qualities and virtues of people, Confucius underlined 'Ren' greatly. It is translated here to be benevolence, but also might be interpreted as humanity, humaneness, human-heartedness, goodness, and perfect virtues. Confucius insisted that 'Ren' (仁, benevolence) was the most important virtue of 'Junzi' (superior man). He thought that 'Ren' (benevolence) was the fundamental virtue, which referred to how to deal with relationships with others and the relationship between individual and

society. It is a very critical concept and the core content of in the Confucius philosophy. In *The Analects of Confucius*, 'Ren' (benevolence) appears 105 times, and 58 chapters are about it (Shen, 2006).

What is the 'Ren' (benevolence)? The simplest explanation of benevolence Confucius gave to his disciples was to love all: love your families, love others, and love your country. That is 'A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 6) Confucius believed that filial piety was the root of benevolence, and loving families was the base of loving others and loving the nation. It is said in the Analects of Confucius that 'They are few who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion. Filial piety and fraternal submission are the root of all benevolent actions.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 2) Confucius indicated that if one didn't love families, he would not love others and his nation. Furthermore, Confucius denoted that being benevolent should treat others as well as oneself, and a benevolent man should respect and care and help others. It is just as Confucius said 'do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself'. (The Analects of Confucius, book 15, chapter 24) A benevolent man is such person who not only wishes to be established himself, but also seeks to establish others; not only wishes to be enlarged himself, but also seeks to enlarge others. (The Analects of Confucius, book 6, chapter 28)

Thoughts of 'Ren' (benevolence) is a very complex system, including many moral virtues, such as embodying in righteousness, loyalty, integrity, forgiveness, courage, frugality, faith, and so on. For example, a benevolent man must be sincere not untruthful, as Confucius saying, 'Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 3). When communicating with others, a benevolent man should be in good faith and honesty, which is the necessary rule obeyed in the social communication and association with others.

2.2 'Li' (etiquette): The External Form of 'Ren'

'Ren' (仁, benevolence) could be expressed through the performance of 'Li' (礼). That is, 'Li' is the way to realize 'Ren' and its external form of 'Ren' (Shen, 2008). 'Li' is etiquette, which is the behavior rule and ceremony. It has been gradually formed, accepted and adopted by people in the process of social communication. 'Li' is the product of human spiritual civilization. Confucius emphasized on ritual ceremonies according to the rules of etiquette very much. Person with 'Li' was modest, gentle, elegant, respectful and virtuous. Confucius said that 'to subdue one's self and return to propriety is perfect virtue' (The

Analects of Confucius, book 12, chapter 1). According to Confucius' words, the superior man knew and behaved according to the rules of etiquette.

There have been so many ceremonies in China, such as sitting and lying ceremony, birthday ceremony, sacrifice ceremony, wedding ceremony, and so on. 'Li' culture has a long history in China, which makes an important effect on forming Chinese national characters. Confucius appreciated various rules of propriety in West Zhou Dynasty. He learnt so much about them from childhood and wanted to rebuild these rules of propriety in his state through moral education. Confucius thought that everyone should have etiquette consciousness in daily life. These rules of propriety should be not just studied seriously but also be put into practice. Confucius said 'Don't look at what is contrary to propriety; Don't listen to what is contrary to propriety; Don't speak what is contrary to propriety; Don't make movement which is contrary to propriety.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 12, chapter 1) Thus it could be seen that Confucius stressed highly the rules of propriety in his moral philosophy.

3. THE METHODS OF MORAL EDUCATION

Confucius had accumulated several effective methods of moral education in his many years' teaching practice. The paper focuses on the following methods: encouraging students to self-cultivate, individual instructing students in accordance with their aptitudes, enlightening student thinking and learning, emphasizing on fulfilling promises, and practice.

3.1 Encouraging Self-Cultivation

The method of self-cultivation is an important feature of traditional Chinese culture. Three main approaches such as having ideals, effort in learning, and introspection will be described in the following passages.

3.1.1 Having Ideals

Confucius believed that having ideals was the first step to educate student to be a moral person. He attached importance to having ideals in moral education. He indicated that everybody should have his life goals and ideals. Furthermore, Confucius instructed students to have ideals and confirm belief. Confucius often discussed ideals with students. He also asserted that the ideals should be referred to virtues. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius said, 'if the will be set on virtue; there will be no practice of wickedness' (The Analects of Confucius, book 4, chapter 4). One day, the master talked with his students about wishes and ideals. He told students that his own ideal is to give the old rest, show sincerity to friends, and treat the young tenderly. (The Analects of Confucius, book 5, chapter 26). He also asked students to establish their own ideals.

3.1.2 Effort in Learning

The most important characteristic which Confucius asked his students to have was making effort to learn. The master told his students that only loving of being benevolence but not loving of learning leads to a foolish ;only loving of knowing but not loving of learning leads to dissipation of mind ;only loving of being sincere but not loving of learning leads to an injurious disregard of consequences; only loving of straightforwardness but not loving of learning leads to rudeness; only loving of boldness but not loving of learning leads to insubordination; Only loving of firmness but not loving of learning leads to extravagant conduct (The Analects of Confucius, book 17, chapter 8). Not only did Confucius encourage his students to make effort in learning, he also encouraged them to make this effort by allowing them room to think for themselves. Confucius believed that thinking and learning could mutually promote each other, as he saying 'Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 2, chapter 15)

3.1.3 Introspection

According to Confucius, introspection is an important to improve one's quality. One should examine if his/her own thoughts and behaviors are correct or conformed to moral rules. If there is something wrong, one should correct it immediately; if there is nothing wrong, one should do harder to improve oneself. One student often introspected himself according to Confucius' words, as recorded in *The Analects of Confucius* that he examined himself everyday on three points :1)Whether he had been faithful in transacting business for others; 2) whether he had been sincere in intercourse with friends; 3) whether he had mastered and practiced the instruction of teacher. (The Analects of Confucius, book 1, chapter 4) Confucius pointed out that when we met a virtuous man we should learn to be equal to him; when we met a man without virtue, we should turn inwards and examined ourselves if we had the same weakness. (The Analects of Confucius, book 4,chapter 17) Through introspection, students can check their behaviors and know better about themselves to improve self-cultivation in moral.

3.2 Individual Instruction

Confucius recognized that there were many differences from each student in various ways , such as personality, intellectuality, ability, styles of thinking ,and so on .So, he suggested that teaching students should be individually instructed according to their aptitude and personal characteristics in education(Wang,2004). The master carefully observed each of his students to study the strengths and weaknesses of their characters. Once he understood the characters of his students he was then able to individualize his teaching for the goodness of each person.

Zi Lu and Ran Qiu both became important in government; yet Confucius knew that he had to handle them in opposite ways in teaching. Zi Lu once asked

Confucius if he should immediately put a maxim into practice as soon as he heard it. Confucius asked him not to apply it immediately, but take counsel from his father and brother before rushing off into action. Yet when Ran Qiu asked exactly the same question, Confucius told him that he should immediately put it into practice. A third student named Gongxi Hua who had heard both conversations became confused and asked Confucius for an explanation. Confucius said that Ran Qiu was retiring and slow, so he urged him on ; but Zi Lu tended to be fanatical, so he held him back (The Analects of Confucius, book 11,chapter 22) This is a good example of teaching students according to their aptitude.

3.3 Enlightening

Confucius' pedagogical methods are striking. He never discoursed at length on a subject. Instead he posed questions, cited passages from the classics, or used apt analogies, and waited for his students to think out the right answers. Confucius said, 'I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 7, chapter 8).

Confucius didn't impart knowledge into students directly, but often encouraged students to think and discuss the ideas by themselves which he only tersely mentioned. For example, one day he talked about 'the Way'. He only told students 'the Way had an all-pervading unity' and then left without saying more. Students were very interested in this idea, but didn't understand it well. Teacher had left, so they had to continue to discuss the issue to figure out by themselves. Finally they had many meaningful ideas on the topic. Students benefited a lot from the method of enlightening. One student who was called Yan Yuan said that 'the master, by enlightened and orderly method, skillfully leads men on. He enlarged my mind with learning, and taught me the restrains of propriety. When I wish to give over the study of his doctrines, I can not do so until I had exerted all my ability.'(The Analects of Confucius, book 9, chapter 10)

3.4 Practice

There is an idiom in the China that is 'virtue lies in practice'. As it said in *The Zhou book of Changes*, 'Practice is the foundation of morality.' (Zhou, 1991, p.267). Practice is regarded as the foundation of morality. If we want to know someone is a moral person or not, it is not important to know how much moral knowledge he/she has, but important to know if his/her behaviors in practice are earnestly and sincerely in accordance with certain moral principles.

Confucius loathed a 'mean person', who said a lot but actually did very little. When he was asked about how to be a noble person, Confucius said 'The superior

man wishes to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct.' (The Analects of Confucius, book 4, chapter 24). 'The reason why the ancients did not readily give utterance to their words, was that they feared lest their actions should not come up to them'. (The Analects of Confucius, book 4, chapter 22). Confucius implied that if one had promised to do something, he must fulfill his words; if he could not fulfill, he should not give his words randomly. In a word, practice is the key method in moral education. By repeated practice, moral behavior would be strengthened and the effect of moral education would be heightened.

CONCLUSION

Confucius had set up a complete moral system, and gradually developed his own system of moral education thoughts, which are the precious inheritance of Chinese culture. He proposed that the goal moral education was to help each person improve one's moral character and conduct, to become a completely virtuous person. The idea of 'Ren' is regarded as the most important virtue, and the idea of 'Li' is regarded as a modality of 'Ren'. Both of them are the key contents of moral education, and the core of his moral system. Confucius was a great educator, who had put forward useful methods of moral education: encouraging students' self-cultivation, teaching students according to their aptitudes, enlightening students learning and thinking, and emphasizing the practice. All of these thoughts and methods have still significance for contemporary moral education.

We can acquire some inspirations from Confucius' thoughts on moral education from a contemporary perspective. Firstly, morality should be paid high attention and ought to be the overriding priority in contemporary education. Cultivating child to be a virtuous person who can benefit others and the society is the most important in education. Everyone in the society not only has moral

knowledge, but also has moral behavior in daily life which is much more important. Secondly, the goal of moral education is to cultivate a person with great virtue, in essence, to be a person with love. Teaching child to love is much more important than teaching him to get high credits in study. The love is an extensive love, which is not only loving families, friends, and country, but loving the whole human being and the whole world. Thirdly, effective methods which are proposed by Confucius still could be used in modern moral education. Everyone is different. Each student should be educated according to his own characters. Furthermore, students need to be encouraged to have own ideals, love learning, introspect self, think for themselves, and carry moral thoughts into practice. In short, Confucius' thoughts on moral education are both extensive and profound and provide significant reference for contemporary education in China.

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