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9 Virtues and Rituals

Confucianism and Education for Justice

Baldwin Wong and Liz Jackson

Confucianism is one of the most important enduring traditions of thought in the world. As such, scholars in recent years have considered Confucian perspectives on human rights (Rosemont, 1988; Ames, 2011; M. Sim, 2011b; Angle, 2012), distributive justice (Fan, 2010; Chan, 2014; Tan, 2014b; Kim, 2018), democracy (Tan, 2004; Kim, 2016), and meritocracy (Bell, 2006; Chan, 2014; Bai, 2020). However, Confucianism's significance in relation to education for justice has hardly been considered. This is perplexing because Confucius is often considered the greatest teacher of all time in China (*Zhisheng xianshi* 至聖先師). As Li Chengyang argues, from the “classic Confucian thinkers of over two thousand years ago, it is evident that education is of paramount importance to Confucianism” (2017, p. 41). Confucian scholars throughout history, such as Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472–1529), devoted tremendous time and effort to running schools and teaching. Given its influence, Confucianism has undoubtedly shaped views about education and justice not only in China and East Asia but far beyond it over time through the Asian diaspora.

In relation, biased and stereotypical understandings of Confucianism are sometimes provided in international scholarship. Often Confucianism is understood as a moral, but not ethical philosophy, particularly by western scholars who tend to treat the moral and ethical as a binary, at odds with a Confucian view. In addition, negative stereotypes are prevalent despite their contrast with much Confucian scholarship, perhaps used to further distinguish Confucianism from western views. For example, some suggest that Confucianism encourages blind submission to authority and rote memorisation in schooling (e.g., Bloch, 1989; Sim, 2011a; Tan, 2014a; Shun, 2016). Given Confucianism's global legacy, such views hinder global understanding and multicultural recognition of scholars and students within and beyond East Asia who have been influenced by the tradition.

In this chapter, we consider the implications of Confucianism for understanding education for justice from a cross-cultural view. We ask: What are the implications of the Confucian view of justice and education? And how can a Confucian view contribute to current international debates related to education for justice? We begin by discussing the context of Confucius' thought, and his emphasis on the value of harmony, in contrast with the

common western liberal focus on the social contract. Then we discuss the implications of Confucianism's focus on moral development and human flourishing in relation to education for justice. As we show, in many ways Confucianism is similar to virtue ethics in western philosophy, although there are important differences between the two as well. In particular, a focus on rituals has distinctive ramifications in Confucian education for justice. In the last section, we consider what global (and particularly western) scholars and educators can learn from Confucianism.

As stated in the introduction of this volume, the normativity of education can be explored in three dimensions: justice in education, justice for education, and justice through education. In relation, we believe that more appropriate and meaningful recognition of the Confucian view of education for justice can stimulate international readers and particularly those in the western world to reconsider the Confucian tradition in general, and how justice can be achieved through rituals in education, in particular. Thus, Confucianism can complement a western or other global orientation toward justice in education and need not be discarded as relevant to broader conceptualisations of education for justice.

Background

Confucianism has been an influential philosophical doctrine in East Asia for over 2,000 years. Confucius (孔子, 551–479 BCE), who was sometimes called Kongzi or Master Kong in the West, lived in the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history (722–481 BCE). This was a time of political turmoil: The central authority had disintegrated, and the kingdom was divided into many dukedoms, among which wars frequently occurred. Confucius was particularly concerned in this context with widespread political disorder. In relation, he sought harmony as vital to ameliorate disorder and offered solutions oriented towards developing and restoring harmony in his society.

At the societal scale, Confucius envisioned that a good government that can maintain harmony is a government led by morally exemplary people (*junzi* 君子).¹ In relation, he noted that human beings (all human beings, as will be discussed later) are capable of developing a variety of commendable virtues, such as humaneness (*ren*), on the path to becoming morally exemplary. In this sense, Confucius' philosophical concern is similar to that of Locke (Kim 2009). Both attempted to show that human beings are not bound to live in a chaotic, war-like state of nature and are morally capable of developing a harmonious political order. Hence, although Confucius is best known for his moral teachings of benevolence and filial piety or devotion, his philosophical concern was fundamentally political. At the same time, Confucius' ideas are intrinsically important to education, as he focused on how humans can develop in such a way as to enable greater social harmony.

As the Confucian view of justice entailed envisioning and cultivating morally exemplary people, many consider Confucianism as a form of virtue ethics

(Ivanhoe, 2013; Jackson, 2021). Indeed, Confucians describe virtues within a teleological view of the flourishing of human nature. Similar to Plato and Aristotle, Confucius believed that social reputation, the accumulation of wealth, and the satisfaction of sensual desires are not necessarily to be eschewed in a flourishing life (Van Norden, 2007: 99–100). However, he did not consider any of these as high orders of good or necessary for human flourishing. Rather, to Confucius, human flourishing involved living harmoniously with the social and natural environment. This is essentially about developing valuable relationships with people around us (*Analects* 4.5, 4.9, 7.12).

To develop meaningful relationships, a person should develop their moral potential and become a virtuous person, i.e., a *junzi*. Moreover, aspiring Confucians should not only aim at the full development of their own virtues. As Confucius stated, “Desiring to take his stand, one who is Good helps others to take their stand; wanting to realize himself, he helps others to realize themselves” (*Analects* 6.30). The moral developments of individuals and society are thus closely related to each other. In brief, if justice implies an ideal vision of what a society should be (Simmons 2010: 7), then a Confucian conception of justice implies all people’s full moral development to achieve the ideal of *junzi*.

While he observed that some people are evil, Confucius was confident that all people could become morally virtuous in the right environment and with the right influences. Here relevant details were provided by his follower, Mencius (孟子, 372–289 BCE). Mencius is famous for his claim, similar to that of Rousseau, of “human nature being good” (性善) (*Mencius* 3A1). The claim is not that all humans are *de facto* good. Rather, it is that humans are born with the potential for virtue (*xing* 性), which can be nurtured or stunted. Given this potential, human beings naturally have moral emotional dispositions that draw their attention to salient normative features of the world. For example, when a child is about to fall into a well, almost everyone naturally has a feeling of alarm and sympathy and wants to rescue the child (*Mencius* 2A6). Mencius calls these innate moral emotions the “sprouts” (duan 端) of virtues, and he offers an analogy between the growth of plants and the development of moral emotions (*Mencius* 6A7). In a healthy environment, nascent sprouts can gradually grow to become fully flowering, mature specimens. Similarly, under proper circumstances, humans can fully realise their moral potential and achieve virtues.² Mencius further outlines how different moral emotions can be developed into different Confucian virtues:

From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human.

The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness [*ren* 仁]; the mind's feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness [*yi* 義]; the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety [*li* 禮]; and the mind's sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom [*zhi* 智].

(*Mencius* 2A6)

The basic educability of all human beings has always been a central tenet of Confucianism. Given this belief in universal moral potential, Confucians believe that mass education is essential for achieving an ideal society. This is best represented by Confucius' famous claim that "[i]n education, there are no differences in kind" (*Analects* 15.39). No matter what class one is in and which family one is from, everyone is capable of becoming a *junzi*, so long as they receive a proper education. One of the chief political concerns of Confucians is, therefore, to ensure that a government provides widespread education for all in the society (Brindley, 2021). To Confucians, education is a primary good for all people.

However, although each person is capable of being virtuous, not all are effectively trained to be virtuous. Here the solution is given by another Confucian, Xunzi (荀子, 310–220 BCE). To Xunzi, rituals play a crucial role in transforming character. Despite innate moral emotions, humans have diverse desires. Some desires may tempt people to be immoral and thus to bring society to chaos. Therefore, humans require the moral use of rituals as a system of concrete and detailed instructions, specifying what they should say and do in particular contexts. According to Xunzi, by following rituals, the moral nature of humans can be cultivated gradually, and harmony can be eventually achieved:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals...to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. ... This is how ritual arose.

(*Xunzi* 19.11)

In brief, Confucian education is ritual-centred. This emphasis makes Confucian moral and political philosophy and virtue ethics different from western virtue ethics (Koehn, 2020). Why do rituals have such a function of moral transformation? The Sinologist Herbert Fingarette once said that Confucius was insightful because he recognised the “magical” effect of rituals, in the sense that rituals enable people to realise values effortlessly (1972, pp. 6–7). What is the secret behind this “magic”?

The Importance of Rituals

Rituals have a broad range of meanings. They are artificial rules made by humans, but they are also regarded by participants as sacred, as they are felt to objectively prescribe behaviour (Schwartz, 1985, p. 67). Rituals “cover everything from solemn performance of an elaborate rite to the ‘excuse me’ after a sneeze” (Yearley, 1990, p. 37). Rituals can involve formal ceremonies, such as marriages, funerals, and sacrifices to ancestors. But they also refer to the multifarious social norms that govern people’s interactions, which usually fall under the category of “etiquette”.

The distinction of *yili* (儀禮) and *quli* (曲禮) in Confucianism may be helpful here. *Yili* refers to ceremonial rituals, whereas *quli* refers to minute rituals, like rituals at family meals, greetings between strangers, clothing to wear at funerals, etc. As Fan argues, every culture has ceremonial rituals that constitute important events of that culture. However, Confucianism is one of the few cultures that takes minute rituals, especially the relationship between minute rituals and moral development, very seriously (Fan, 2010: 172). Hence, Confucian education has a distinctive cultural character that gives significant attention to small, concrete patterns of personal behaviours and interactions.

Some readers, at the first glance, may feel strange that rituals are given such weight in a normative theory. More frequently, western cultures emphasise the value of self-determination and the free development of individuals. In this context, they have been indifferent if not unfriendly to the value of traditional rituals. To some western students and scholars who enter Chinese cultural contexts for the first time (for example), rituals seem to represent rigid, monotonous, and coercive rules. For them, rituals bear little connection, or even an inverse connection, to virtues and human flourishing. Some claim in relation that rituals are merely a means for a ruler to impose a social ideology on people. By using formalism and repetitiveness, people are compelled to act in particular ways that facilitate the ruling of authorities (Bloch, 1989). Others may be more sympathetic to rituals but still value them primarily from a pragmatic perspective. That is, rituals can meet the needs of society by being an effective tool that binds individuals together (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Durkheim, 1995), but in this framing of rituals, they barely have moral significance.

Due to such doubts about rituals in western societies, many modern and contemporary Chinese scholars who were deeply influenced by western culture also framed rituals as mere oppression. Some describe such so-called oppression of individuality as “eating the people” (*chiren* 吃人). Even modern neo-Confucian scholars, such as Mou Zongsan and Tu Wei-ming, discount the role of rituals because they believe that this makes it easier to defend Confucian morality (Huang, 2020, p. 227). However, while rituals can indeed be oppressive and facilitate authoritarianism, Confucianism nonetheless specifies an important and distinctive role for rituals in moral transformation (Van Norden, 2007, p. 106).

Like western virtue theorists, Confucians believe humans learn to acquire virtues. But what are the details of this process? To Aristotle, virtues are acquired through habituation (Aristotle, 2004, 1103a). A person becomes just by performing just actions and courageous by performing courageous actions (Jackson, 2021). But can a person perform virtuous actions before they have virtuous character? Here Confucianism has more substantive insights. Although everyone has the potential to be virtuous, one may not precisely know what a virtuous person should do in a particular context before they realise their moral potential. Rituals thus act as a guideline for people to follow and discipline themselves in the process of moral learning.

One may have the innate moral emotions to treat others well, but one may not know the correct way to express these emotions in particular contexts. In this case, the concrete and detailed guidance of rituals can enable them to learn how to express their emotions appropriately. For example, one may naturally have a feeling of grief when one attends the funeral of a friend. However, without rituals, they may use the wrong words or wear the wrong clothes to reflect their grief, and they could unintentionally upset their friend's relatives. When following an all-black dress code, other people are more likely to understand and feel their grief and respect. In brief, rituals provide a way for people to act virtuously in everyday practices of human communication.

Furthermore, rituals do not only tell people how to be virtuous. They also *train* people to be virtuous. As Confucius said, to achieve *ren* (goodness), “restraining yourself and returning to the *li* (rituals) constitute *ren*” (*Analects* 12.1). Rituals provide daily training that continuously transforms the character of people and enables people to work toward the ethical ideal. The road to virtue is difficult and long, requiring day-by-day effort. In the beginning, a person may follow rituals simply because of social pressure. Nevertheless, by exercising rituals, a person turns away from their concern in satisfying their self-interested desires. They gradually learn to act virtuously, as they are on the way toward developing a virtuous character. Over time and with practice, exercising rituals can become akin to reflex. Finally, people who effectively adopt rituals in everyday life can spontaneously act and treat others virtuously. This is the crux of the Confucian theory of education – external acts gradually modify internal virtuous character. Unlike in some western theories of education, developing one's capacities for rational persuasion and deliberation is insufficient for moral cultivation here (e.g., Jackson, 2021). Rather, by performing mannerly conduct steadily, one's mind is gradually shifted (Olberding, 2019, p. 71). Here virtues of persistence, seriousness, devotedness, dedication, commitment, and perseverance are implicitly learned through the practicing of rituals.

Xunzi frequently emphasised “accumulated effort” in this context (*Xunzi* 8.475–500; cf. *Xunzi* 1.70–135, 4.210, 9.545–550). As Xunzi says, “[I]f you accumulate soil, you will form a mountain. If you accumulate water, you will form a sea”. Similarly, “if ordinary men in the street and the common people accumulate goodness and make it whole and complete, they are called sages” (*Xunzi* 8.490–495). Mountains and seas are made up of soil and

water. But the formation of mountains and seas requires someone to put enormous time and effort to accumulate soil and water day after day. Soil and water can become mountains and seas, but only after a long process of accumulation. Similarly, everyone has the potential to become a *junzi*. But to become a *junzi*, significant time and effort are required. Making moral progress, especially in the earlier stages of moral development, requires careful monitoring of one's attitudes and behaviours. Whenever a person performs an action required by rituals, they slightly adjust and reform their disposition towards virtues. A virtuous character is thus built up from the steady accumulation of seemingly minor events.³

Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the Confucian education of rituals is that people internalise the values expressed in the rituals. In the words of Edward Slingerland, the ideal should be *wu-wei* (無為) (2003). This is a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely from one's spontaneous inclinations. One can then act in a way consistent with the requirement of Confucian ethics without extended deliberation and inner struggle. This ethical ideal can be contrasted with another state, *you-wei* (有為), in which one's moral actions involve too much purposeful or instrumental endeavour (Kim, 2009, p. 398). Although in both states a person acts virtuously, the former state is preferable to Confucians because it is more autonomous and natural. One does not need to consciously force oneself to act virtuously. Instead, one simply acts morally. Confucius achieved this state in his later age. When he was between 15 and 30, he had to force himself to rigorously follow ritual practices. However, "at seventy, [Confucius] could follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety" (*Analects* 2.4). Only at an advanced age and with training could he act virtuously with ease, with his dispositions thoroughly harmonised with the dictates of morality.

This insight about the relationship between ritual practice and ethical transformation echoes work in cognitive psychology. This research suggests that human beings have two distinct systems of thought and action. The first is "hot cognition," which is thought and action that is "fast, automatic, and mostly unconscious". The second is "cold cognition", which means thought and action that is "slow, deliberative, effortful, and conscious" (Slingerland, 2014, p. 32; cf. Stalnaker, 2010, p. 415). For example, hot cognition may motivate one to get ice cream because sugar is instinctively appealing. Meanwhile, cold cognition may urge further thought related to reflective consideration of their health and weight. The purpose of practicing rituals is to train "cold" cognition to become "hot". Initially, people's cold cognition tells them to follow ritual practices. Their hot cognition, however, may tempt them to do otherwise. After practice, exercising rituals becomes something that people can do effortlessly and spontaneously. Being virtuous eventually becomes a kind of hot cognition.⁴

Hence, a unique feature of the Confucian view of justice within and beyond education is its emphasis on rituals. Similar to other virtue ethics theories, Confucianism assumes that a flourishing life is constituted by exercising virtues. However, Confucianism offers a distinctive account of ethical

transformation which is based on the daily training of rituals. To train people to be virtuous, one must provide a set of concrete guidelines and let people get used to following them. By practicing repeatedly, people's virtuous character can gradually develop and, eventually, their emotions can lead them to normally act in a right way. It may be simple to offer people reasons to be virtuous, but it takes years to mould virtuous character.

The Confucian Contribution to Western Education for Justice

We do not argue that Confucian education should replace civic or other education for justice in western democratic societies. Nevertheless, we do believe that western education for justice can be benefited by incorporating some insights of the Confucian view. In discussions of justice in western education, liberalism is often a guiding theory. However, there are some important differences and clashes between Confucian insights and liberal ones in relation to justice in education.

First, it is worth recognising the different foundations of Confucianism and liberalism. Liberalism, and particularly political liberalism, aims to justify the legitimacy of the state in a pluralistic society (Rawls, 2005; Larmore, 2020). Political liberals principally believe that the power and resources of a government are publicly owned by all citizens. Therefore, if a government must use its power and resources to enforce laws and policies, it must use them on the ground of public reasons that could be accessible to all reasonable citizens (Wong, 2022). Accordingly, many laws and policies that promote a particular comprehensive doctrine, such as Christianity and Islam, should be avoided, for these laws and policies would be rejected by citizens who do not endorse these comprehensive doctrines.⁵ Hence, according to political liberalism, Confucian education should not be promoted by public power and taxation because it assumes a Confucian conception of flourishing life, and this conception of life would be rejected by taxpayers who believe in other religions or are affiliated with other cultures. Many non-Confucian-heritage citizens would reject the Confucian perfectionist view of justice that all people should be ethically developed to be a *junzi* (Wong, 2019).

However, this does not mean that liberal education has nothing to learn from Confucianism. Since the 1980s, more and more political liberals recognise that the problem of good government cannot be solved merely at the procedural and institutional levels. If all citizens are selfish and evil, then a liberal democracy cannot function effectively. Some level of civic virtues is, therefore, necessary (Macedo, 1990, pp. 138–9; Galston, 1991, p. 217). Christie Hartley and Lori Watson (2014) summarise civic virtues that do not presuppose any comprehensive doctrines but are required in a political liberal society:

- i *Respectfulness*: Citizens are disposed to acknowledge each other as individuals with equal standing. They recognise others have the right to make claims of justice on others and propose laws and policies. Despite disagreements, they do not disparage, degrade, or humiliate others.

- ii *Toleration*: Citizens are disposed to refrain from interfering with an opposed other, even if the citizens believe that they should interfere. So long as others' acts are consistent with principles of justice, citizens should allow others to pursue their life goals.
- iii *Full autonomy*: Citizens are willing to participate in society's public affairs and share in its collective self-determination over time. Citizens may not need to value autonomy as self-government and reflect on their own comprehensive doctrine, but they should participate in political affairs as independent members of a political community.

Besides these virtues, Hartley and Watson mention others, such as attentive listening, patience towards others, and sharing of social space (Hartley and Watson, 2014, p. 428). How can western education teach students to have these civic virtues? The educational methods suggested by political liberals are mainly about the education of knowledge and rational thinking (Jackson, 2019, 2021). For example, Blain Neufeld and Gordon Davis suggest that governments should require schools to incorporate a civic education curriculum (2010, p. 99). In this curriculum, the history of religious conflicts would be taught, so students would understand the value of peace and compromise. Also, students would participate in debates concerning a range of socially and politically divisive issues. Through these debates, students learn to exchange their views with others in terms of public reasons (Levinson, 2014).

However, as we mentioned earlier, knowledge and rational persuasion are insufficient in transforming a person to be virtuous. They are insufficient for exemplary character, and their ultimate relationship to harmonious relations and peace (other goals for justice in society and education from a Confucian view) is questionable. If ethical transformation can be effectively pursued by practicing rituals, would any rituals cultivate a civically virtuous citizen? As previously mentioned, western virtue ethics also encourages habituation of virtues, particularly among young learners (Jackson, 2021). Furthermore, a pedagogy of autonomy wherein students are significantly moulded by teachers and other elders in order to develop dispositions in line with the development of virtuous character and rationality can imply the need for education for character development, emotional self-control, and some degree of obedience, especially when it comes to young learners (Maxwell and Reichenbach, 2007; Jackson, 2021).

More broadly, western societies contain numerous rituals, within and beyond education, which are rarely reflected upon, in relation to socialisation and development of positive relations with others, developing civic virtue, and so on (Jackson, 2021). In this context, it is not as outlandish as it might first appear to consider a more rich and detailed view of rituals in education, as means to not only possibly oppress or impose overt authority but rather to enhance justice in education through engaging students in meaningful and sustained reflection on the nature of civic virtues and their cultivation. To repeat, to recognise the potential of rituals in education does

not mean demanding blind obedience or total submission to authority. Rather, a thoughtful view of the value of rituals in human social and emotional development can enhance civic and moral education and education for justice across cultural contexts. Finally, such an education on the value of civic virtues for justice and the related practicing of rituals can lead to greater moral recognition of the value of so-called comprehensive worldviews like Confucianism, rather than to the disparagement of such views as mutually exclusive with liberalism, given the significance of Confucianism not only in China but throughout the Asian diaspora worldwide.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have elaborated on some significant aspects of a Confucian view of justice in relation to education. Additionally, we sought to make critical comparisons with influential western views. As we discussed here, Confucianism need not be seen as at odds with western education, including that which is influenced by liberal philosophy. Confucian education, with its focus on character development through rituals, is not merely education for rote memorisation or obedience training. Rather, it reflects, like in western virtue ethics, the importance of habituation to moral and ethical development as a learning process. This can be seen as a kind of critical-normative approach to education, as stated in the introduction. Rituals can have a place in learning and education for justice across societies. This perspective thus provides a new direction for critically evaluating existing civic education within and beyond Confucian heritage societies.

Through learning about Confucian views of justice, western and international readers and educators can also develop a more open-minded, positive recognition of Confucian philosophy and its influence on East Asians, also respecting the variety of views found within the tradition, as in western philosophy. Scholars and students coming from Confucian heritage backgrounds who may value ritualised behaviours in education and society are not brain-washed dupes (Sim, 2011a) or excessive lovers of authority. In Confucianism, one learns not just reasons for but also means of development through ritual practice. They develop character traits such as humaneness, perseverance, open-mindedness, patience, seriousness, and commitment. Greater recognition among diverse scholars of the insights of Confucianism can thus enable the future bridging of longstanding cultural divides and dismissals, which is also critical to the enabling of justice through education around the world.

Notes

- 1 The term *junzi* is sometimes translated as “gentleman” (such as in D. C. Lau’s translation), but “morally exemplary person” is a less misleading, more useful contemporary translation.
- 2 In this sense, Mencius is similar to sentimentalist virtue theorists, such as Hume, who also describes the virtues primarily in terms of certain broadly construed emotions (Ivanhoe, 2013, pp. 51–52).

- 3 This does not mean that Confucianism is only concerned with dogmatic education. On the contrary, Confucianism encourages reflective understanding in the process of learning (de Bary, 1983, pp. 21–42; Lai, 2006; Shun, 2016). Rituals can also be adjusted by people after rational reflection (Angle, 2012, p. 96).
- 4 Apart from Slingerland, a similar view that rituals are a form of situationist strategy that is effective in developing virtuous character can be found in Hutton (2006), Sarkissian (2010), Mower (2013), and Wong (2021, pp. 24–25).
- 5 However, it does not mean that *any* promotion of cultures and religions would be rejected by political liberalism. So long as the promotion could be justified by some public reasons, the laws and policies related to this promotion are legitimate (Macedo, 1995).

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