

The Teachings of Confucius: A Humanistic Adult Education Perspective

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Abstract: Confucianism is an ancient philosophical system that has much to offer in terms of teachings about education and adulthood. This paper explores ethical values and key principles that help define the philosophical basis of Confucianism, and provides comparative approaches between Confucianism as a humanistic philosophical system and the Western context of humanistic adult education.

The global context in which we live today has resulted in adult education learning about other worldviews and philosophical systems. Recently, the adult education literature on non-Western perspectives has grown with increasing attention being paid to understanding the role and influence of cultural values in shaping adult education theories and practices. The study of various philosophies of adult education is essential to an understanding of the most general principles of the educational process and helps us grapple with philosophical issues including the definition of adult education, the place of the needs and interests of adults, contrasting views of method and content, the concept and relevance of adult development, programs and objectives, the teaching-learning process, and education for social change (Elias & Merriam, 2005). However, most philosophical orientations on adult education are based on Western concepts and perceptions. Adult education has paid little attention to the teachings of Confucius, even though those teachings focus largely on education and adulthood. While much has been written on Western philosophical orientations of adult education, the literature on Confucianism has had minimal discussion of relevant and insightful topics. Therefore, the goals of this article are: 1) to discuss ethical values and key principles that help define the philosophical basis of Confucianism; 2) to provide comparative approaches between Confucianism as a humanistic philosophical system and the Western context of humanistic adult education; and 3) to draw implications for adult education.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system based mainly on teachings and concepts from Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.E.) of ancient China. Although Confucius himself claimed that he was not a creator but instead a transmitter of the wisdoms of the ancient sage kings, he has been known as the father of the most dominant thought system of East Asia for over two thousand years. Much of East Asia, including China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan, is influenced by Confucianism and shares certain common philosophical heritages and cultural elements.

For Confucius the ideal world is a world without conflicts and a world full of harmony. In order to make this happen, Confucius aimed at reforming society by creating a virtuous government and society that would be ruled by people who have high moral standards. Thus, Confucius taught his disciples to be a *junzi* (moral person, profound person, superior person, or virtuous person). Unlike a *xiaoren* (inferior person, petty person, or small-minded person) who is preoccupied with selfish material desires, a *junzi* takes care to cultivate his or her sublime moral

character by pursuing *jen* (benevolence or humanity), *yi* (justice or righteousness), *li* (propriety or rite), *chih* (wisdom), and *xin* (faithfulness) which enables one to become fully human (Zhang, 2000).

For Confucius, family is essential for becoming truly human. For him, family is a basic social unit that is vital to the formation of self, human relationships, and moral consciousness. Confucius stressed the duties and obligations among family members, which can be interpreted as the hierarchical nature of human relationships in cooperation with reciprocal altruism. Confucius believed that if virtuous human nature and the human relationships were attended to within a family context, then people could extend a human life of humane flourishing and civil harmony with their “neighbors and beyond the confines of the immediate community, into the world of the state and governance” (Berthrong & Berthrong, 2000, p. 17).

Basic Assumptions as a Humanistic Philosophy

The following are the underlying assumptions of the Confucian humanistic perspectives, which have led to major discussions in the literature concerning humanistic adult education: human nature, the self and autonomy, and self-actualization and self-cultivation.

Human Nature

Claimed by Mencius (372 – 289 B.C.E.), who was one of the masters of Confucianism, Confucian human nature is originally good. Although other Confucians argued that human nature is evil or neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil, Mencius’s view of human nature and human goodness is consistent with basic ideas in the orthodox Confucian tradition. This view of human nature corresponds to many humanists in the West. Unlike the Freudians who see human nature as disruptive and pessimistic, and unlike the behaviorist’s mechanistic and atomistic view, humanists believe in the inherent goodness of human nature (Elias & Merriam, 2005).

Mencius’s humanistic view, however, does not imply that the goodness of human nature is always maintained throughout one’s lifetime. Mencius argued that although people are born with an innate good nature, there are some people who do not follow the Confucian way of being human and more specifically, do not properly cultivate *jen* (humanity) and *yi* (righteousness). He suggested that people who aspire to reach *jen* (humanity), the highest virtue of Confucianism, continue to cultivate their humaneness, and learn ceaselessly in order to be a Confucian virtuous person.

The Self and Autonomy

Confucianism views the self and its autonomy differently. Confucianism sees human beings as organic and network-based entities that are interconnected with each other, family, community, and society. Self in the classical Confucian sense is a center of relationships rather than an isolated being (Tu, 1985). In other words, the self-identity of an individual is not to be found by separating and isolating the self from others, but by understanding one’s position in relation to others (Lee, 2002). Pratt (1991) claims that the Confucian self is “the center of relationships and engaged in a dynamic process of becoming or developing” (p. 288).

Because the teachings of Confucianism suggest that the individual learns the standards for proper roles and behaviors within the family, and interacts with the family members, friends, neighbors, and all members in a society with the Confucian ethical values, the Confucian self, in this sense, can be described as being morally interdependent with others. Examining a Confucian perspective of self-learning, Kim (2000) summarizes that the Confucian self, when compared to the Western tradition of self, is “relational and emphasizes moral and social dimensions” (p. 116).

In this sense, the Confucian self can be understood in terms of the relation between individual and society. From the Confucian point of view, an individual's autonomy must be understood in the context of one's social roles and relationships. That does not mean that people do not have the capacity to choose freely and to shape their lives in a way that is only controlled and determined by external influences (Shun, 2004). Instead, autonomy in the Confucian context is exercised through the social aspects of human life. This viewpoint asserts that Confucians attempt to understand becoming fully human in a social context and living as a true human being is meaningful only in relation to wider society.

The Western tradition, on the other hand, emphasizes that individuals are autonomous, rational, and self-conscious individuals who are capable of making personal choices and context-free choices in a conceptual vacuum (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Lee, 1994), which has been a target of widespread criticism among some adult educators (Pearson & Podeschi, 1999). The main criticism concerns humanistic individualism's failure to explain the complex relationships between the individual and the society. Because of its excessive emphasis on the individual's freedom human beings appear to be ultimately free floating in a society based on their own wills and desires regardless of the inherent structural constraints experienced by the individual in his or her social context.

Self-Actualization and Self-Cultivation

For humanists, more specifically, humanistic psychologists, self-actualization is conceived to be central to the development of fully realized human beings. The main idea popularized by Abraham Maslow that human motivation is based on a hierarchical nature of human needs became manifestly useful and influential in adult education and education in general. However, again, much criticism has been directed towards Maslow's theory as advocating an excessive individualism (Pearson & Podeschi, 1999). While Maslow's self-actualization theory centers on one's desire for self-fulfillment toward realizing his or her potentials, Confucius places an emphasis on developing into a highly moral person as a process of self-actualization. One of the main concerns of Confucianism is how to be fully human. Confucius and Mencius stress that lifelong efforts through self-cultivation and learning are the means by which one becomes truly human.

Consistent with the ultimate goal of Confucianism, a person should cultivate the self not only to become fully human, but also to create a harmonious and peaceful society with the Confucian concept of human-relatedness. Unlike the Western humanistic perspective which focuses mainly on person-centeredness to be self-actualizing, the underlying assumption of Confucian humanism is that human-relatedness is an integral part of one's quest for self-realization (Tu, 1979). Thus, for Confucians carrying out one's self-cultivation is more than the actualization of a potential selfhood, and it must be understood as a concern for the family, community, and society.

Confucianism and Humanistic Adult Education

For Confucius the goal of education is to become fully human – human beings who learn and pursue the Confucian core values (*jen, yi, li, chi, and xin*), cultivate them, and practice them in their day-to-day lives. As such, the whole focus of Confucian education is the development of whole persons rather than narrowly trained specialists. Confucius's efforts to establish Confucian humanistic education are discussed in the Confucian classics, especially in *Elementary Learning* and *Great Learning* which had been used as textbooks for the education of children and adults.

Elementary Learning and Great Learning

The main focus of *Elementary Learning* is to teach basic Confucian values for the young. The book compiled and commentated by Chu Hsi (1130-1200) had been widely used and accepted as a children's textbook at home and in educational institutions. If *Elementary Learning* is for the young, then *Great Learning* is for adults. As one of the sections of the *Book of Rites*, this book was also compiled and commentated by Chu Hsi. Through *Elementary Learning* a person acquires early lessons for guidelines of human nature. But as human beings grow, it is necessary to respond to continuous change and generate virtuous transformation (Tu, 1993). Consistent with the humanistic aspects of *Elementary Learning*, the goal of *Great Learning* is to cultivate moral self-knowledge and virtue in the fulfillment of Confucius's ultimate end of creating a peaceful and harmonious world. *Great Learning* had served as a practical guideline for adult education, establishing the core Confucian values and attitudes deemed to be standard for society.

Approaches to Learning

Many humanistic adult educators have adopted the principles of learning from a humanistic philosophical stance. According to Elias and Merriam (2005), several components of humanistic education have been discussed within adult education. These include student-centered orientation, the teacher as facilitator, and the act of learning as a highly personal endeavor. As has been discussed so far, the Confucian framework as a humanistic philosophical system provides similarities but is somewhat different especially with approaches to learning. For example, Tweed and Lehman (2002) compared Confucian and Socratic approaches to learning and found that Confucius valued effortful, respectful, collectivist, pragmatic learning, and poetic ambiguity.

In addition to studying Confucius's approaches to learning, other researchers have focused more on Confucian-influenced learning and teaching practices of the students and teachers from the Confucian-influenced culture and within the Confucian-influenced cultural regions. They found that teachers and learners in Confucian-influenced culture have different styles of teaching and learning. First, in Confucian-influenced culture, the teacher-learner inequality is prevalent. Second, in Confucian-influenced culture, face-saving is important in understanding learners' behavior. Pratt (1991) found that Chinese learners are reluctant to speak up in a larger group. He indicates that attempting to get adult students to express their opinions and feelings may not work, because most students are reluctant to do this. Third, some researchers have found that learning under Confucian culture focuses on rote learning and memorization. To sum up, learning in the Confucian-influenced culture is somewhat different from that of the North American notion, especially Knowles's (1980) andragogy that values self-direction, student-centered processes, the teacher as a facilitator, and sharing control and authority between students and teachers.

Implications for Adult Education

At least four implications for adult education and learning can be drawn based on the discussions above. First, for Confucius becoming an adult means not only a biologically mature person but also a person who has made a lifelong effort to learn and apply this knowledge and wisdom to the process of becoming a full person for a harmonious society. In this sense, the Confucian philosophical orientation is particularly suited to the concept of lifelong learning. According to the Confucian *Book of Rites*, the coming-of-age rite, a young person's transition to adulthood, is held for a person reaching the ages between fifteen and twenty. The coming-of-age

ceremony is preceded by a development process of maturation: education at home begins at six, sex differentiation in education at seven, etiquette at eight, arithmetic at nine, formal schooling at ten, and by thirteen a person will have studied music, poetry, dance, ritual, archery, and horsemanship (Tu, 1979). The following passage from the *Analects of Confucius* explains different stages of growth.

The Master said, “At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty I established myself (in accordance with ritual). At forty I no longer had perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven. At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing the boundaries of right.” (*Analects of Confucius* 2:4; trans. by Tu, 1979)

From childhood to old age, learning signifies a continuous growth both intellectually and morally. Thus, Confucius’s concept of youth, maturity, and old age characterizes not only the whole process of growth, but also how the process of maturation develops and becomes deeper and richer over time. Adulthood conceived in this way is manifested as an unfolding humanity through lifelong learning.

Second, although the humanistic adult educators stress the learning process that involves the human potential for growth in terms of promoting the whole, emotional, psychological, and intellectual person (Elias & Merriam, 2005), they ignore moral and ethical aspects that are a part of the whole person. According to Confucius, only through lifelong efforts in self-cultivation and learning, can one become a virtuous human being who takes care to elevate his sublime moral character by pursuing *jen*, *yi*, *li*, *chih* and *xin*. Among them, *jen* is the highest virtue one can aspire to. *Jen* refers to natural human-heartedness, goodness, benevolence, charity, and humanity toward oneself as well as humankind as a whole. *Jen*, thus, is like a seed that, when planted in one’s heart, sprouts and grows with self-cultivation and learning, and gives “meaning to all other ethical norms that perform integrative functions” in a society (Tu, 1979, p. 6). As an externalization or outward form of *jen*, Confucius paid special attention to *li*, the norm and standard of human behavior in a specific social context. According to Confucius, only when people cultivate themselves and return to *li* can they reach *jen*. *Li*, therefore, is closely related to the concept of *jen*. Propriety in the Confucian context must be derived from *jen* as an inner morality. Hence, propriety without humanity is useless, and humanity without propriety is inoperative. In short, Confucian ethical values can provide a more holistic basis for the humanistic tradition of adult education. The underlying tradition of humanistic adult education has been based more on psychological aspects of the concept of a self, freedom and autonomy, human growth and development, and motivation and self-actualization. More attention needs to be paid to the moral and ethical dimensions of humanity in social contexts.

Third, most discussions and analyses of humanistic adult education have skewed toward the United States (Pearson & Podeschi, 1999), and been typically rooted in the society and culture in which an individualistic cultural orientation prevails. For example, the humanistic adult education paradigms such as the autonomy of the individual, which is recognized by Rogers’ fully functioning individuals, Maslow’s self-actualizing adults, and Knowles’s (1975, 1980) andragogy and self-directed learning are emphasized in the individualistic North American context. The relational and social aspects of the Confucian concept of the self and humanistic tradition have potential implications for adult education in general, especially those in non-individualistic cultures and societies. Confucius believed that a person is a social being who always is interacting with others. “It is impossible to associate with birds and beasts, as if they were the same with us. If I associate not with these people, - with mankind, - with whom shall I

associate” (*Analects of Confucius* 18:6; trans. by Legge, 1979)? In sum, Confucius’s emphasis on family as a basic social unit, the human relationships, the duties and obligations, *jen* and *li* toward others, peace and harmony with others and nature, and becoming truly human through self-cultivation and learning is reflected by a broadened concern for the human as well as society.

Fourth and finally, understanding Confucianism may help educators and practioners who teach adult students from Confucian-influenced cultures or who plan educational programs for them in the face of increasing cultural diversity as well as complexity. Understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Confucian traditions may also help to diminish conflicts among different cultural views in terms of learning and teaching.

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