

Confucian Education in China:
Rethinking the Assumed Attribution

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Most experts on Education and History talk about various east-Asian countries and refer to certain ones as being Confucian in nature of their educational practices. It is something that is said so often that, at this point, it can appear to go without saying. The most obvious example of which would be the country where this famous educator hails from some 2,500 years ago. It's been a long time since then, and though material from his Analects still appears in classrooms in China, it doesn't take too much digging to learn that students not only don't have to commit this material to memory, but when they do, they don't always understand it. As far as Confucius being the root of educational practices in China, the first consideration must be to what this educator stood for. Additionally, consideration of what his method of education was should be taken into account. After looking at these foundational points, and how these two aspects of Confucian mentality are applied to modern classrooms in China, we can consider their current state and consider, critically, their position in modern Chinese education. Once we do, this long-held assumption is not so clearly present.

According to Don Starr of Durham University, Confucian education is based on ideas like, "morality and hierarchy" (4). Since these are such major components of society, education then becomes a focus of that society, so a focus on education might implicate a Confucian society. Is this the case in China, where there is a 7.4% achievement of higher degrees (KPF, 4), as opposed to the U.S. where that number is possibly quadrupled or higher? This could correlate to the number and location of schools, geographic diversity, and subject focus, among other factors, but this would certainly insinuate less of a time commitment to education overall. There is; though, apparently more of a commitment to early education as is seen in Chinese enrollment in kindergartens. This is apparent when considering the competitive identity of kindergartens where children are first taught the method of large-class memorisation and reading in a teacher-centred

environment. In western classrooms, reading often occurs as part of homework, but these practices exist in the west as well, but to lesser extents. This indicates a strong commitment to early mainstream education in China, and could be indicative of the preparation for the more selective processes that will follow down the road.

But if universal and dedicated education is a goal of Confucius, is competitive selection for early and later education opportunities in line with this educational philosophy, particularly when spots for opportunities can so often come down to social and financial considerations? Regarding financial expenditures in early education, this also sets a precedent for the Chinese family that will spend money to the tune of the second-largest expenditure for households (24, Starr). Many in the west, however, consider education to be more of a self-contained apparatus in which taxes should be paid to finance teachers and pay for class material, and family investment is less of a factor. Though many western students excel due in part to considerable family contributions and investments, this difference of thought appears reflective of traditional familial hierarchies and loyalties in Confucian thought that permeate Chinese culture, where the contributions of and to family might be expected to be more direct; however, government spending continues to increase as well.

When it comes to the results of education, the difference between ‘east’ and west might be considered concept versus fact. Chinese education follows teaching to tests, something which western parents and educators often voice displeasure with, as in the considerable controversy surrounding *no child left behind* policy in the United States. Confucius certainly expressed a fondness for learning, “I yield to none in point of love of learning” (Analects, book 5), but is this also a fondness for the memorising of facts, dates, formulas, and so on? History, for example, was recorded in a more narrative form in China. Clearly, there was not a huge focus on

chronology for Sima Qian who compiled The Shiji, as this record is broken up by people and topics. We should also consider what Confucius' contributions were. Though much material would have been limited to the upper class at the time, so that educated persons would generally be those of upper class, many of Confucius' students were not rich. Ideas were exchanged between him and his students to allow for the material attributed to Confucius and his students to grow internally and externally. This does not stress a social hierarchy here, but a hierarchy of mental fortitude where class is correlated but not a determiner of status. This could lead to the focus on exams to evaluate the mental and spiritual learning of a student if said exams were to have a proper focus.

Unfortunately, education favours the rich in those who can afford time and expenditures such as books, travel, lodging, and so on for their studies. The opportunity to study material for exams, and research past exams, and discuss concepts with tutors creates socio-economic inequality where, when there are correct answers that can be studied, there is more of an opportunity for those with time and money to be educated on how to find those 'right' answers. Interpretation and creativity can be sacrificed here for competition and memorisation, yet this is the environment that is supposedly representative of, everyone being able to succeed if they work hard enough as per Confucian theory (18, Starr).

So then, if these are characteristics of Confucian versus western educational practices, are they absent or neglected in the west? The structure of education is very similar to the west, with kindergartens, bilingual schools, compulsory education, and universities with quotas on enrollment. It is the classroom environment rather than the structure, though, wherein we can observe the difference between China and the west. Subjects like Science and Mathematics, where China tests better than much of the west, certainly involve memorisation. Could it be that

training in memorisation from a young age, as in China, makes the difference? Should we, instead, consider the more social and free environments of the west that allows for the western students' excelling in other subjects? Is it the approach of teachers or the learning environment itself, or a combination, that makes the biggest impact?

Regardless, the difference in achievement creates a clear separation, but the ambiguity as to the cause of this rift makes the picture a bit muddy. Western education seems to have all of the components of Chinese, but with some in limited amounts. There are times when western students will be spoken to on subjects and they will be expected to listen and contemplate rather than engage the speaker. But the majority of the time, students will interact with the material. Even in Science, students will focus on memorisation as well as application of ideas in activities. There are certainly aspects of western education absent in Chinese education, and this suppression of expression may translate to hierarchy and a feeling of respect, but the western educator is certainly in a higher position than the student, and would hopefully command respect as well. So then, are these staples of Confucianism or education? Regardless, Chinese students must be able to interactively deal with certain subjects when called upon to do so, but if they are exclusively taught to be conforming rather than engaging, how can they apply certain academic knowledge in environments that require the engaging of a topic? Perhaps the issue lies rather with modern political realities and ideologies.

There is a dichotomy between the values of the Mao-communist and the values of a China that is modernising. In addition to the avoidance of isolation and self-sufficiency that defined Mao's communist China, there is also the cost of education that people paid. In attempting to unite the country through equality, the *bourgeois* were executed en masse. These included those who were educated and had learned different from Maoist doctrine. The fact that Mao's

reputation is considered impugnable means that there is no apology for these events and that they could theoretically happen again. With a modern China that is increasingly moving away from these values and practices, this could be highly problematic in some ways if the government continues to move forward in this direction. Granted, like early Confucian sentiments on women, times change, and social realities sometimes evolve to the point where traditional rules and ideas no longer apply, but when a dialogue cannot exist, it can be hard to establish a hard-line that is not tainted by an unspoken but obvious hypocrisy. The government is still communist, at least in name, but how then does this effect education, particularly from a traditional point? The obvious answer is that the groups that control the country determine the truth of history and path of the future. This is really the face of all issues and policies around the world; but still, just as it's important to consider the schools of thought that influence an emperor, so must we consider the schools of thought that influence the party. Marxism left its mark, but Confucianism has far more history, so is Confucianism really a factor in the policy-makers' decisions?

The trap that many people often fall into is to think of education reform in China based on western practices as something new. Actually, Paul J. Bailey documents, in his article, *Globalization and Chinese Education in the Early 20th Century*, that lobbies for education have existed with western input since the Qing dynasty, under which Confucius became a symbol for education (403). These lobbies did not continue uninterrupted, but their successors have existed in various forms, and the reforms they put in place always survived as, at least, something to be considered. Western input existed in the form of missionaries to China, and westerners who held government positions as well. China's official stance is that western values have no place in their classrooms, particularly regarding material deemed anti-communist (AFP), and China is attempting to create a more centralised identity for education. Still, the modern communist China

is much different from that of the past, and contributions from the past as well as from around the world are selectively applied to Chinese governance despite the various hard-line stances of the government.

So then Chinese education is certainly reflective of concepts addressed by Confucius. Western education, though, is as well. In China, Confucius has become a symbol for education as he was viewed as an educator rather than a philosopher. In modern times, though, his beliefs would only share fragments of current practices, and major concepts of his teaching like sage-hood appear to have disappeared entirely. Actually, like the concept of sage-hood and the idea of singular leaders being chosen by heaven, certain ideas of his, if expressed in modern times, might label him a separatist or worse, and condemn him to life in prison. Communist policies are the rule of the land, so this would hardly be unexpected. Communist policymakers, therefore, are trying to incorporate the best educational components, and Confucius' educational ideas are studied and considered in China. Still, in the recent document for educational reform goals released by Beijing, the word Confucian appears twice including derivatives, moral 4 times including derivatives, and party 22 times (China Central Government). Confucius certainly revolutionised education, but western influences, communist ideology, and the contributions of many others have made massive impacts as well. In conclusion, it's essential to then consider the realities of education rather than its theoretical foundations and components.

Whereas modern education around the world generally focuses on academia, it may be argued that Confucius' idea of education focused more on morality, "The man of greater mind who, when he is eating, craves not to eat to the full; who has a home, but craves not for comforts in it; who is active and earnest in his work and careful in his words; who makes towards men of high principle, and so maintains his own rectitude—that man may be styled a devoted student"

(Analects, Book 1). Confucian education began with a humble person living and studying with willing and open-minded students and exchanging ideas. The teacher served, in an earned and acknowledged position, as a moral guide, where morality related to the facts of the world and the options of the people within it. Knowledge was valued, but not the same as wisdom; and wisdom was not the accumulation of knowledge, but the ability to apply knowledge in the world in which one exists. Both western students and eastern students have their strong points, and both have the ability to reflect critically on certain subjects, but it would be difficult to truly argue that either student has their foundation in morality. Further, it would be difficult to argue that application of knowledge defines either educational structure. Both schools of students suffer from educational systems that do not provide ample opportunity to integrate learned concepts into real-world wisdom. Teachers are either disrespected or irrefutable in interactions with students, and students are more often than not concerned less about wisdom and more about how completing certain educational benchmarks benefits them. But it's just a sign of the times and a transformation of roles. It's unfortunate, but sage-hood is simply not an in-demand skill in today's market economy.

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