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TRADITIONAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHIES AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON MORAL EDUCATION

Guozhen Cen and Jun Yu

There’s a saying in China: “The three teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are like the legs of a tripod; you cannot lack even one.” Though this was first spoken more than 1,000 years ago, it underscores the importance of these three traditional philosophies in Chinese culture, even today. Xiao or filial piety, is one of the most important Confucian values, and has been used to teach children in East Asia how to respect and care for their parents and ancestors for thousands of years. The Daoist idea of “letting things take their own natural course” is still a very popular belief in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese language itself has more than 500 idioms that reflect Buddhist teachings and principles, such as, “Good deeds create good karma, and bad deeds create bad karma” (Zhu, 2006).

These three traditional philosophies served as the primary sources for guidance in China’s moral education until the mid-nineteenth century. Today, the official basis for moral education in China comes from Communist ideology, though it is clear from the examples above that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism still remain influential to a certain extent in Chinese society. In this chapter we will introduce these philosophies and then explore their perspectives on moral education. More specifically, we will introduce each major philosophy, the moral values it promotes, the goals of moral cultivation it sets, and the pathways through which one can reach these goals, as well as major implications for moral education.

CONFUCIANISM

Brief Introduction to Confucianism

Confucius (551 BC–479 BC) is the founder and the most prominent representative of Confucianism, and his thoughts encompassed morality, education, and politics during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC–476 BC; Cihai Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1990). This period was a tumultuous time in Chinese history where there were multiple states
constantly at war with each other in a struggle to gain power over an area that is part of today’s modern China. This milieu led to a troubling collapse in etiquette and good manners in society. In an attempt to offer a solution to this crisis in manners, Confucius developed the philosophy which we today refer to as Confucianism. Confucius’ ideas are mainly recorded in the Analects. There were eight schools of Confucianism during the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC), with the schools of Mencius and Xunzi as the most important ones.

Confucianism is a system of thought that is centered around Confucius’ theory of ren (Tang & Zhang, 1999). For Confucius, the basic meaning of ren is to love people (“Analects,” n.d.). This encompasses feelings—such as love and empathy—and behavior, and is primarily focused on interpersonal relationships. In other words, ren is about how to treat others and how to behave yourself. This idea of loving others inherent in ren is reflected in two different sayings in Confucianism. First, “do not do to others that which you yourself would not want to be done to you.” Second, “if you want to become successful yourself, you must first help others become successful; and if you want to be understood by others, you must first understand them.” These highlight the selflessness, compassion, and acceptance of others that are at the heart of ren. Confucius proposed ren as the highest moral ideal and principle for an individual and a society. He advocated that individuals should aspire to become a person who is ren, while society itself—including its rulers—should operate in a way that is consistent with the principle of ren. Through learning and self-cultivation, people can better manage the family, make the country orderly, and bring peace to the world.

What characteristics does a ren person have? From Confucius’ perspective, such individuals exercise self-restraint and are courteous. They are humble, benevolent, loyal, and generous toward others, and hardworking and frugal in their lives. They also live courageously and are persistent in pursuing their moral ideals. Confucius said that a truly ren person would be willing to die rather than compromise their ideals and live in a way that would be inconsistent with being ren. Overall, a ren person could be understood as possessing perfect goodness and operating in the highest spiritual level in which the will of the heavens and humanity are united (Feng, 1989).

**Confucius’ Perspectives on Moral Education**

According to Confucius, everyone is born the same—it is education and self-cultivation that makes a difference in an individual’s moral character. Confucius believed that education should be available to everyone regardless of status which is consistent with his idea of ren—to love everyone. So he started private education that was open to everyone, which was revolutionary for his time, when only nobles had access to education. He maintained that the goal of education—along with self-cultivation—is to help individuals become ren.

To become ren, one must possess those qualities valued and promoted in Confucianism. The most important of these qualities are li or propriety, xiao or filial piety, ti or brotherly love, zhong or loyalty, shu or tolerance, yi or righteousness, zhi or wisdom, and xin or integrity.

Li or propriety originally referred to ceremonial procedures in life, such as weddings and funerals. But it also was about the proper etiquette for living, and showing respect for gods and ancestors. Additionally, li reflected the inherent hierarchical structure in society—where, for example, certain ceremonies were once only reserved for nobles.
In *li*, people should behave according to the specific etiquette or procedures in certain situations and according to their status. For example, you should use the appropriate title when addressing an individual; when you meet a respected individual, an elder or a teacher, you should show respect by kneeling or bowing before them; and when you sit around the table, you should choose your seat according to your status as compared to your dining companions. In promoting *li*, Confucius underlined that there were differences among individuals in terms of a person’s status or age. He considered it important that people behave in a way that fits their status or age, as this can ultimately promote harmony within society. When society is harmonious and orderly, it is consistent with the ideal of *ren*.

Xiao or filial piety and *ti*—love and respect among siblings—can be thought of as the idea of *ren* as it applies to families, helping to maintain order and harmony among family members. Xiao is where an individual shows respect to their family’s elders and ancestors. Some examples of how one might demonstrate *xiao* in their family include taking care of one’s parents in their old age, marrying and having children to carry on the family lineage, and visiting and worshipping the graves of ancestors on a regular basis. Similar to *li*, Confucius also recognized that there are differences among family members, and these differences are the basis for how children should treat their parents, grandparents, and ancestors. *Ti* originally referred to love and respect for one’s elder brothers, but could be broadly seen as being applicable to relationships between all siblings. Confucius considered *xiao* and *ti* the foundation for *ren* because he believed that moral behavior started in the family. If people could behave appropriately in their families, then they could expand that moral behavior to society as well.

Zhong refers to loyalty in interpersonal relationships, as well as the idea of fulfilling your duties or responsibilities to your country, work, family, and friends. What behaviors are consistent with *zhong*? For example, if someone assigns you a task, you should try your best to work hard and complete the task. Parents should fulfill their responsibility to properly rear their children, just as teachers should fulfill their responsibility to properly teach students; in both cases, parents and teachers should act as models. Also, students should study hard, finish their homework, and learn what is required of them by their teachers and schools. *Zhong* is important because, in order to achieve the kind of order and harmony of a society that embodies *ren*, you need to be able to trust in others—that they will do what they are expected to do.

Shu, or tolerance, means to put oneself in another’s place and be able to forgive others. This idea is embodied in the Confucian saying, “do not do to others that which you yourself would not want to be done to you.” In other words, you should take others’ perspectives and empathize with them before doing something that might affect them. According to Confucianism, this kind of tolerance reflects the idea of loving others, which is at the heart of *ren*. In urging people to think first about how their actions could impact others—including harm to others—shu can help reduce and resolve interpersonal conflict, helping to create a more harmonious interpersonal environment.

Yi or righteousness broadly refers to morality and justice, but in a more narrow sense refers to a standard by which one judges what is right and wrong, good and bad. Confucius advocated righteousness for the public and society instead of for individuals. In other words, he believed that when one is facing a situation where personal interest is at stake, one should first consider its benefit to the greater good. In the end, if the greater good is more important than personal interest, then one should make the choice for the
greater good, even if it is harmful to you at an individual level. There is a selflessness in the principle of yi which is consistent with the idea of loving others in ren—in this case, to the point where others and society matter more than your own interest.

Zhi or wisdom refers to both knowledge and wisdom. Confucius valued education. In promoting the value of zhi, he wanted people to learn how to differentiate between right and wrong—and also use this understanding to guide themselves towards proper moral behavior, instead of merely being controlled by one’s own impulses or desires. In order to reach this level of understanding, Confucius recommended that people study li or propriety, know people through what they say, know the limits of one’s knowledge, listen and read more, and find and follow the good in the world. Only through the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom can one have a proper understanding of Confucian values and aspire to become someone who is ren.

Xin or integrity refers to honesty and consistency between deeds and words, and primarily is shown through one’s behavior. In other words, you should be sincere to yourself and towards others; people should be able to trust in your words—that you will do what you say you're going to do. If what you do and say is consistent, then others can trust in you. Likewise, if you can trust in others, this will enhance your relationships. Otherwise, without trust, people will cheat each other or be suspicious of one another, which leads to a society that is not prosperous—the opposite of a harmonious and orderly ren society. Therefore, xin is the foundation for all interpersonal relationships and can help one become successful.

While all of these values form the basis for becoming an individual who is ren, how can one achieve this? According to Confucius, first you should aspire to become ren. Confucius considered this goal-setting as a primary task in moral education. Once the goal is clear, you should persistently pursue it. Second, you must then learn more, increasing your knowledge base. Confucius believed students should study all of the important major subjects in school; in his time, these were propriety, music, poetry, history, and the divination classic the Book of Changes. When you study, you must think actively about what you’re learning—in other words, you should ask questions and think about its relevance to conduct in the real world. Confucius believed understanding what you’re studying is good, being interested in what you’re studying is better, and enjoying what you’re studying is best. He thought it was delightful to review what you have learned and try your best to practice it in life. Additionally, you should try to put yourself in the place of others before taking action. Finally, self-reflection is necessary in order to know whether or not your behavior has met the standard of ren. All of the self-improvement and self-cultivation inherent in becoming ren encourages you try to be a better individual than you were before, including expanding your knowledge, mind, heart, and behavior beyond your previous levels.

Confucius also laid out general developmental stages over the course of an individual’s lifetime, each marking a certain milestone in terms of their level of understanding and level of cultivation. By 15 years of age, a person should devote themselves to study. By 30 years of age, a person should understand li or propriety and be able to stand on their own in society—in other words, hold down a career and successfully manage interpersonal relationships. By 40 years of age, a person should not be perplexed about the world—in other words, one should understand how the real world works. By 50 years of age, a person should understand their destiny—what they were meant to do in life as mandated by the heavens. By 60 years of age, a person should be able to understand anything
they hear, and regardless of whether what is said is positive or negative, they should be
cultivated enough to discern any possible wisdom or good points in the conversation.
By 70 years of age, a person should feel free to follow their heart’s desires but also intuit-
ively follow the Confucian principles and not break them. These stages can illustrate the
fact that Confucius considered learning and self-cultivation a lifelong process, one that
requires persistence. It also demonstrates that, for Confucius, it is not enough to simply
understand moral values—you must live them and cultivate yourself, to the point where
your thoughts and behaviors are well-integrated and moral behavior is automatic and
natural to you.

**MENCIUS’ AND XUNZI’S PERSPECTIVES ON MORAL EDUCATION**

Mencius (372 BC–289 BC) was a famous philosopher in China who was widely regarded as
the successor of Confucius and the most important representative of Confucianism after
Confucius himself. One of Mencius’ contributions is how he expanded the theory of
*ren*, which is the basis of Confucianism. Originally, Confucius did not explain where *ren*
comes from or what was the basis for establishing *ren* as the basic moral principle. Con-
fucius said that everyone is born similar and should aspire to become a person of *ren*, but
since he considered it a lifelong process—and claimed he never became *ren*—it seemed
difficult to achieve. Theoretically, Mencius made people more hopeful about becoming
a person of *ren* by pointing out that everyone has the potential. Mencius thought that
everyone had a basic innate propensity towards becoming *ren* (“Mengzi,” n.d.). As an
example of this, he mentioned that if people saw a little girl about to fall into a well,
everyone will immediately feel compassion for her. Mencius said that this feeling of com-
passion does not result from a person’s desire to be seen publicly as a good person, but
simply because it is in their human nature to feel this way.

Mencius considered morality as the defining characteristic of humankind. Accord-
ing to Mencius, one cannot be considered human without four propensities. The first is
compassion, which is the origin of *ren* (loving others). The second is a sense of shame
towards yourself and a dislike of others’ wrongdoing, which is the origin of *yi* (righteous-
ness). The third is to give others precedence out of courtesy and respect, which is the
origin of *li* (propriety). The fourth is a sense of right and wrong, which is the origin of
*zhi* (wisdom). Mencius believed that people are predisposed to have these four propensi-
ties. And these propensities need to be developed into the four corresponding moralities
of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*.

Despite the fact that he believed people are inherently good, he thought that this could
be influenced by a person’s environment—that in a bad environment, goodness can be
lost. So he advocated taking active steps to prevent this from happening. Mencius recom-
manded reducing your own desires—as he believed that the more desire you have, the
less you will have of the four propensities. He thought that one way to reduce desire was
to place yourself in a situation of hardship. He also recommended self-reflection, where
you should reflect on yourself and try to find fault in yourself. Mencius also advocated
being determined not to change your mind because of personal interest but instead

to show determination and courage in life. Eventually, one can become an upstanding
individual who would not sacrifice one’s own mores for promises of wealth and fame,
or be subdued by power in situations where one is asked to do something immoral
(Jin, 1995).
Xunzi (about 313 BC–230 BC) was a respected Confucian philosopher at the end of the Warring States Period. Counter to Mencius’ view, Xunzi believed people were innately evil and goodness was learned (“Xunzi,” n.d.). In his mind, to be considered innately good you needed to be born that way, instead of learning to be a good person. Xunzi believed people are born with needs, desires, and tendencies such as seeking food when hungry and seeking to rest when tired. If the inborn tendencies develop without limits, they will lead to bad consequences, especially to society. To illustrate his point, Xunzi provided the example that people are born with a fondness for their own self-interests. Uncontrolled development of this tendency will lead to conflict, fighting, and a diminished consideration for others. Then the society would be in disorder and people would be poor. Xunzi considered human beings evil in the sense that uncontrolled natural desires will lead to evilness, but desire itself is not evil.

Xunzi believed that the inherent evil in human nature can be changed for the better through education and proper laws and regulations (Zhang, 1995). Education was important to him because he believed people needed to be taught propriety, or li, since people are not inherently good. But because not everyone could become good through education, proper laws and regulations are needed to determine what is not proper behavior, and to punish people for it.

Xunzi established li or propriety as the foundation for moral education. He believed propriety is a precondition not only for an individual’s growth but also for achieving success and societal peace, and he emphasized that propriety was the standard and norm for behaving and managing life. Therefore, for Xunzi, an important task of moral learning is to fully understand propriety.

Xunzi believed the goal of moral education was to cultivate good character. He posited that people could aspire to three different levels of cultivation. For shi, or scholars, people cultivate moral character at the most basic level, upholding humaneness and abiding by propriety. Scholars have the most ordinary moral character. Junzi, or gentlemen, possess a strong will and have practiced self-cultivation more persistently than scholars; one’s speech and conduct are always consistent with the ethical moral principles and free from external constraints such as wealth or desire. The gentleman has a more lofty moral character than the scholar. Shengren, or sage, is the highest state of moral cultivation; there is nothing the sage does not understand, suggesting a kind of moral perfection or ideal. Since Xunzi considered people innately evil, we can view these levels on a spectrum where evil is at one end and then, through education and cultivation, one can move away from evil and towards goodness—first to the ordinary scholar, then the lofty gentleman, and finally the ideal sage. Though he differentiated the levels of cultivation in a conceptual sense, this is nevertheless informative because it provides some basic guidance on the stages one might go through to become a sage.

In summary, the heart of Confucianism is the idea of ren, or loving others. Confucianism is mainly concerned with morality in interpersonal relationships and behavior, and identifies values that cover a wide range of relationships and behaviors—ren (loving others), li (propriety), xiao (filial piety), ti (love and respect among siblings), zhong (loyalty), shu (tolerance), yi (righteousness), zhi (wisdom), and xin (integrity). The goal of moral education in Confucianism is to cultivate oneself into someone who is ren—courteous, courageous, selfless, and loving towards other people. Mencius and Xunzi both expanded our understanding of Confucianism. In seeing people as innately good, Mencius underlined the great moral potential for humans to be better individuals.
Xunzi, however, saw people as innately evil and therefore brought up the necessity for punishment and formal education for guidance. Overall, Confucianism stands out as one of the world’s earliest forms of moral and character education.

**DAOISM**

*Brief Introduction to Daoism*

Daoism was established at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC–476 BC) by its founder Laozi. Like Confucius, Laozi was also troubled by the tumultuous state of the Spring and Autumn Period, with frequent wars, and offered Daoism as a means for people to return to a state of peace and harmony in the world.

Daoism is centered around the Dao, meaning “The Way” (Cihai Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1990). The Dao is the ultimate origin and nature of all things, including heaven, earth, and the entire universe (“Daodejing,” n.d.). In Daoism, the Dao is also the principle for how the world works.

Before Laozi, people thought of heaven as the origin of everything and did not consider if there was something that actually created heaven itself (Wang, 1999). Laozi started inquiring into the origins of heaven and later proposed that the Dao was the origin of everything in the universe.

From Laozi’s perspective, the Dao follows its own course; the universe follows the Dao; the Earth follows the universe; human beings follow the Earth. In other words, the entire world as we know it follows the Dao, which in another sense is responsible for creating what we often refer to as the laws of nature. These laws affect everything from the changing seasons to the change from night to day to how animals live and even how water flows from mountains to the ocean. Laozi proposed that people should learn the ways of the natural world, and then live their lives in harmony with it.

According to Daoism, the world is made up of opposites—such as night and day, life and death, strength and weakness—referred to as *yinyang* or *yin* and *yang*. These opposites depend on each other and complement one another, as there cannot be day without night or strength without weakness. They can even transform into each other over time, such as how day eventually becomes night or how living things eventually die. If one anticipates such changes and stays focused even in the face of the inevitable changes inherent in life such as aging, one can make the most of every moment and live one’s life to the fullest. However, when one deviates from what is considered natural and normal, it will cause a reversion to the opposite and a state that is not natural—for example, exhausting yourself while young will lead to being prematurely old.

While Laozi was the founder of Daoism, Zhuangzi (369 BC–286 BC) carried on and developed Laozi’s thoughts. Rulers at the beginning of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) espoused Daoism as their guiding philosophy. After Emperor Han Wudi of the Han Dynasty promoted Confucianism as the orthodox state ideology, Daoism lost its official status. Although Daoism was not adopted by the government, it played an important role in the development of ancient Chinese thought. For example, Confucianism during the Wei and Jin period (AD 220–420) and the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279) adopted some ideas from Daoism. After Buddhism was introduced to China, scholars applied Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thoughts to interpret Buddhist concepts. Daoism is an important part of Chinese culture and has strongly influenced multiple aspects such as ethics, medicine, politics, technology, and art.
The Daoist Perspective on Moral Education

In Daoism, to be moral you should live your life in accordance with the Dao. Daoism suggests that people let go of the knowledge, prejudices, habits, desires, and ego that have distracted them from their own true nature and the true nature of the world around them, and to develop an inner awareness towards the world and oneself.

Daoism considered that being moral is being natural, so naturalness—that things are best in their natural state—is the highest Daoist moral principle. This is symbolized by the idea of pu, the unworked or uncarved wood. Such a piece of simple and untouched wood is in its pristine state, like a newborn baby, and stands as an example of the original simplicity that Daoists aspire to. In the natural state, a person’s mind is calm and still; like a mirror, the mind can reflect the world without prejudice. Reaching such a state of mind requires a person to first look beyond the kind of knowledge they have acquired through formal education, as such knowledge has from the Daoist perspective distracted people from their natural state. Instead, they should try to see the world more like a newborn infant, which has an inclusive and pristine state of mind and welcomes the entire range of experiences in life without discrimination, judgment, or preconceived notions. To return to the natural state, you should also reduce concern for yourself and reduce your own wants—a kind of simplicity of desire that falls within the Daoist concept of frugality. At the same time, you should live frugally in the sense of economizing your life and not caring about wealth or fame.

Daoism also emphasizes the idea of wuwei, effortless action or action without action. This is best symbolized by water. When water flows around rocks, it does not force its way through a rock, but naturally finds its way around it via the path of least resistance, the path that does not require forcing or straining. Water is also soft to the touch and lays as low as possible to the ground, not seeking to be higher than it needs to be. It is selfless in that it provides nourishment to the earth to help other things grow. Therefore, people should aspire to be like water and live in a way that is accommodating, compassionate, selfless, and humble, a way that does not interfere with or meddle with how things naturally are in the world. A philosophical basis for wuwei comes from the proposition that the world is made of correlates such as day and night, or young and old. These correlates complement each other and can even naturally transform into each other the way day effortlessly transforms into night or how people effortlessly age. This seamless transition from one correlate to another exemplifies wuwei, showing how changes can happen naturally without interference from anything or anyone.

To be consistent with wuwei, a person needs to exemplify the Daoist ideas of compassion and humility. The Daoist view of compassion is about being loving and accommodating. As we discussed above in defining the idea of naturalness, it is important that a person is unencumbered by their past knowledge, habits, and prejudices when they face the world, and this is also true in the case of exemplifying Daoist compassion. Our preconceived or taught ideas can cause us to behave in ways that are forced or taught, which may not be natural or in line with the idea of wuwei. When we are no longer burdened by such ideas, which might otherwise prejudice us against others (such as thinking of criminals as bad people and thus wanting to treat them badly), we are more able to love and accept everyone, even people who are bad or who we were taught not to care about. For example, a ruler with compassion would make sure to find a place within their community for every single person, even the clumsiest individuals, the criminals, or those...
without great talents. And as water nourishes all things without demanding rewards, so people should endeavor to help others in a selfless way.

The Daoist idea of humility is that when people have too much of an ego, it can have a coercive or interfering effect in the world. For example, during the Spring and Autumn period when Laozi conceived of Daoism, China was made up of states that were constantly at war because each of them wanted to be the one state that ruled all of China. This desire for power, where war happened frequently, led to instability in society and the suffering of common people. This kind of result, which is arguably coercive by forcing common people to live in a constant state of war and also interfering in the sense that it interfered with common people’s ability to live peacefully, is not consistent with *wuwei*. Therefore, Daoism recommends that people should not strive to be first or to be ahead in the world, and instead aim for a humble life—like water, which always flows downward and lays as low as possible.

The ideal character that Daoists promote is the perfected individual or *zhenren* (“Zhuangzi,” n.d.). The *zhenren* has returned to their natural state, which allows them to be tranquil and at peace, experiencing every moment without preconceptions. They exemplify frugality, where they lessen their own desires and concern for themselves such that they live a simple and economical life and do not care about money or status. They are like water—showing compassion by being loving and accommodating towards others and the world around them; humble and without ego, preferring to lay as low as possible instead of fighting to be at the top.

While Daoism does not describe a developmental pathway to becoming a *zhenren*, it does advocate a number of approaches for moral cultivation (Ruo, 1999). First, a person must forget everything that is not naturally a part of their own body and mind. Not just the knowledge, prejudices, habits, and anything else that gives them preconceived notions about the world, but also material goods and wealth. Essentially, anything that is man-made should be forgotten or detached from the self. All of these things will tire or worry a person more than is necessary. Forget ego and selfish concerns. Do not seek fame, fortune, or to be ahead of others—do not think about personal gain, in other words. Instead learn to find happiness in simplicity in terms of yourself and your life. After an individual is freed of everything outside of the self as well as ego and selfish concerns, they can become like a blank sheet and face the world like a newborn baby, experiencing it for the first time. In this state, a person has a spacious, open heart that allows them to tolerate and accept anything that happens to them.

In summary, Daoism is a philosophy based on the idea of the Dao, or the Way, which is considered the origin of all things in the universe and the basis for the laws of nature and the universe. In Daoism, to be moral one must be natural, which is why naturalness—the idea that things are best in their natural or original state—is the highest moral principle. Daoism promotes frugality in the sense that you should reduce your ego and desires, and live an economical life without striving for wealth or fame. The Daoist principle of *wuwei*—or effortless action—urges people to behave in a natural way that does not interfere, force things, or meddle in any way. The philosophical basis of *wuwei* comes from the proposition that the world is made of correlates—such as day and night, young and old—which can transform into one another effortlessly. In a moral sense, the idea of *wuwei* promotes being compassionate—as in, a person who is accommodating and loving towards others—and also being humble—as in, selfless and not striving to be ahead or on top. All of these qualities—naturalness, frugality, compassion, and humility—are reflected in the *zhenren*, or perfected individual, which is what Daoists aspire to become.
BUDDHISM

Brief Introduction to Buddhism

Buddhism was said to be established by Sakyamuni, a prince in ancient India during about 600 BC or mid-500 BC. There is no exact consensus as to when Buddhism was introduced to China, but it happened at some time between 2 BC and AD 67. Over time, many schools of Buddhism emerged in China, such as the Discipline School and the Pure Land School, and Buddhism became an important part of Chinese culture (Nan, 1996). The most well-known of those schools, the Chan or Zen School, is seen as a popularized form of Daoism (Ma, 1997). The distinct features of Buddhism in China include simplicity in practice, using the mind as the path to nirvana, becoming a Buddha by gaining sudden insight, and borrowing elements from Confucianism and Daoism into their practice such as filial piety and naturalness (Hong, 2001).

This chapter is focused primarily on introducing Buddhism as it is known in China—not Buddhism as a whole—and discussing its perspectives on moral education. Though Buddhism in China developed its own unique characteristics, it has still retained the original spirit of Buddhism: its emphasis on karma, and the ultimate goal of reaching nirvana—a state of ultimate happiness where one is finally free of suffering—and becoming a Buddha.

Karma refers to any movement or activity which leads to some effect in the world. The idea that goodness brings good karma and evilness brings bad karma is the most typical representation of karma in daily life, and demonstrates the cause-and-effect relation of one’s actions to later consequences. Therefore Buddhists aim to make sure that they promote good karma in the world. But to do so, a person must consider not only their behavior but also their mind, as negative thoughts can also lead to bad karma. In the Buddhist path of cultivation, cultivating the mind is the key and a basis for cultivating behavior—ultimately, so that the mind and behavior are consistent.

The Four Noble Truths, which are the Buddha’s original teachings, encapsulate the basic tenets of Buddhism (Cihai Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1990). Suffering is the First Noble Truth. While the Buddha described birth, decay, death, and not getting what one wants as the main sufferings in the world, suffering can be seen as primarily originating from the body and the mind. The Second Noble Truth is cause—in other words, the cause of suffering. The Buddha considered desire and ignorance the primary reasons that led to suffering. End is the Third Noble Truth—as in, the end of suffering. This is known as nirvana, the enlightened state where one is free from suffering; nirvana can only be reached after removing the causes of one’s suffering. Finally, the Fourth Noble Truth of the path points to how one can reach a state of enlightenment, which is detailed in the Eight Noble Paths.

In the Eight Noble Paths, the Buddha laid out a way to end all suffering which covers moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom (Cihai Bianji Weiyuanhui, 1990). The first is Right View, which means one has an understanding of the nature of reality and also the path towards transformation. Right Thought, the second, refers to right intention without thoughts of greed and anger. Then there is Right Speech, where one inhibits any harmful communication and instead aims to speak in a way that is truthful, kind, and useful. In Right Conduct, a person’s actions should never harm others. Right Livelihood refers to the fact that people should earn a living in a way that is not exploitative or harmful. People also need to constantly and persistently direct their energies towards the
pathway to enlightenment, which is Right Diligence. In Right Mindfulness, a person has an awareness of how things really are in the world and within oneself, without deviant thoughts. Finally, one reaches Right Concentration, where one is not only able to fully concentrate their mind but also has forgotten the self. Buddhists believe an ordinary person can become noble and reach nirvana by successively cultivating oneself through the Eight Noble Paths.

**Buddhist Perspectives on Moral Education**

In Buddhism, the goal of moral education is to reach nirvana. Nirvana is not just a state where a person is free of suffering; in nirvana, a person is selfless or freed from the idea of self. Self is merely a concept created by humans, and self leads to all problems. Because of this false idea of self, people have desires for the self—such as a desire for material goods or a desire to be ahead of others—and desires can lead to suffering. Ultimately, self is not the nature of reality; in actuality, everyone has a true self within them, the Buddha nature. In order to reach nirvana, people need to see through the pretense of self to their Buddha nature, forgetting the idea of self in the process.

Buddhists believe everything, especially humans, possesses Buddha nature. Buddha nature is the ability to gain understanding and be enlightened. Of course, human intelligence and reflection could be compromised or blocked for various reasons such as subjective prejudices or stubbornness. The difference between a Buddha and the ordinary individual is that one is in an “awakening” state and the other is in a “lost” state. Similarly, educators should believe everyone has the capacity to become a moral person. A task of moral education is to eliminate prejudices or stubbornness and guide individuals out of the “lost” state and into the “awakening” state (Li, 2006).

Because everyone has Buddha nature within them, and therefore has the potential to become enlightened, there is innate goodness in everyone. This is the basis for the principles of loving-kindness and compassion—that if everyone has inherent goodness, then we should treat them well and as equals. That means behaving towards everyone with the same kindness and compassion, regardless of whether they are friends or enemies. Loving-kindness and compassion are fundamental requirements for self-cultivation, because through them one can create good karma and remove suffering in the world. Arguably, karma motivates people to do good in the world, since their actions can affect future consequences for oneself and for others.

In the same vein, Buddhism also gives followers the Five Basic Precepts—namely, no harming of living beings, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, and no drinking of alcohol—as a reminder to avoid doing bad, which would lead to bad karma and increase suffering in the world.

Precepts, such as the Five Basic Precepts which exemplify moral conduct, are also considered one of the Three Learnings. The Three Learnings—precepts, concentration, and wisdom—summarize the main methods of cultivation laid out in the Eight Noble Paths. Concentration in this case refers to a state free from external stimuli and internal thoughts or feelings. If a person’s mind always changes based on the environment around them, this can lead to negative feelings such as worries, sadness, or anger. At the same time, memories and deviant thoughts can distract a person from the present moment. When one is completely focused on the current moment, this also can lead to another level. In this level, the mind and body become united, and the boundaries between the self and the external environment become blurred such that the whole universe becomes
a part of what one usually considers “self.” Only when one reaches this level of unity can it be called concentration in the Buddhist sense.

Wisdom is about ridding oneself of suffering. If a person does good but was not rewarded for their good deeds—and subsequently suffers or feels frustrated as a result of not being rewarded—that is not real wisdom. Real wisdom happens at a no-self level. At this level, people do good but not because they hope for some kind of reward; they also are not troubled if other people treat them badly even for their good actions. If a person’s wisdom has this selfless quality, then they can equally love all people and be liberated from suffering. To cultivate wisdom, one must read and understand Buddhist sutras and gain experience through practicing the Buddhist principles in daily life. Over time, as a person becomes more cultivated and closer to reaching the goal of nirvana, these teachings and principles will be automatically be integrated into their behavior, such that they no longer need to look for inconsistencies in behavior.

As a summary of the Eight Noble Paths, the Three Learnings can be divided into three different levels—with precepts as the basic level, concentration as the intermediate level, and wisdom as the most advanced level. People who wish to cultivate themselves must first master the precepts, then moving on to concentration and, later, mastering wisdom. Once one reaches a state of enlightenment, with a cultivated mind, everything in daily life—even the most mundane experiences, such as drinking tea or brushing your teeth—can be considered as opportunities for cultivating morality (Foguang Xingyun, 2008).

In summary, Buddhism is a philosophy whose main points are encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths—which state that there is suffering in the world, that suffering has a cause, there is an end to suffering (nirvana), and there are paths to that end. The Eight Paths describe the pathway through which a person can reach the state of nirvana, where they no longer suffer, and these paths cover the areas of moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom. Reaching a state of nirvana is the goal of moral education in Buddhism, and by reaching this state one can forget the self and discover their true self within, the Buddha nature, which is also considered an awakened state. Since everyone has Buddha nature in them and is therefore inherently good, Buddhism encourages people to treat others with loving-kindness and compassion. Such good behavior is also important because it creates good karma, which will lead to good outcomes for the individual. Besides karma, the Five Basic Precepts—which cover moral conduct—encourage people to behave in a moral way. Through good moral conduct, intense concentration that makes one forget the self, and selfless wisdom—the Three Learnings—one can eventually reach an enlightened state.

CONCLUSION

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are three major thoughts in traditional Chinese culture that dominated education including moral education in China. Confucianism and Daoism first developed locally and Buddhism developed after its introduction from abroad. During over 2,000 years of history, these three traditional teachings expanded into various schools that have had enormous influence in Chinese society and daily life.

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all care about humanity, but each has a different emphasis. Confucianism emphasizes being involved in the world so that individuals can better promote societal development. Daoism emphasizes forgetting the world, so that individuals can become free from external limitations. Buddhism emphasizes
transcending the world, which means to pursue inward happiness. The different emphases and applications of the three traditional Chinese thoughts are represented in the Chinese saying, “Govern the society with Confucianism, manage life with Daoism, and manage the mind with Buddhism.”

In terms of morality, Confucianism emphasizes interpersonal relations, becoming a person of ren who loves people, has talents, and cares about the society. Daoism advocates that one should become a perfect person who follows the nature, lives in accordance with wuwei, and leads a simple life that is free from troubles of fame and wealth. Buddhism emphasizes that one should cultivate the self to reach a state of nirvana, and that everyone is equal and subject to the cause-and-effect law of karma that motivates people to do good in their lives. Overall, these three philosophies could be valuable resources for moral education in terms of nurturing humanity in modern societies, and could offer inspiration to those individuals seeking alternatives to Western approaches.

REFERENCES