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A Confucian perspective on teaching thinking in China

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Introduction

Developing thinking skills is an important educational agenda and has become an increasingly dominant topic in all sectors of education and policy making today all over the world. Researchers from various philosophical perspectives have examined and studied the meaning of and approaches to teaching thinking skills, and its relationship to learning (see this volume). It is important to note that the development of thinking skills has shifted from the development of intelligence and cognitive capacity to creativity, collective cognition and learning to learn together (L2L2, Wegerif, this volume). The majority of work and research thinking is predominantly developed from a Western perspective on ways of thinking, learning and knowing whilst very little is known about Eastern conceptions, understanding and approaches to thinking, specifically from a Confucian perspective. Although Confucius is widely recognized as one of the greatest proponents of education in human history, his educational philosophy has often been overlooked in the important discussion on this topic and, indeed, is sometimes misrepresented and misinterpreted by researchers. However, some recent research has raised the profile of this issue and has argued strongly for a more in-depth and informed understanding of Confucian-heritage education (e.g. see Kim, 2003; Li & Wegerif, 2014; Shi, 2006; Zhao & Biester, 2011).

In general, these scholars challenge the widely held view of Chinese learners as rote, passive and silent learners because of the influence of Confucian values. Indeed, they argue that Confucius and other Chinese philosophers do encourage deep learning and thinking and that Confucian-heritage learners do engage in higher-order thinking. For example, Kim (2003) argues that critical thinking is clearly evidenced in the work of Confucius and other Chinese philosophers whilst Li and Wegerif (2014) present a case that Confucius places importance on thinking in the processes of learning, doing and being. They argue that the kind of thinking that Confucius advocates is different from the dominant Western style of thinking. It is not critical thinking or creative thinking, which are advocated in the West and which focus on individual development, but reflective thinking that encourages thinking in relation to the community in which a person is participating. Reflective thinking is correlational and social because it is deeply embedded in the norms and culture of society. Thus, it is theoretically and practically important to understand Confucius’s thinking if we are to understand Chinese learners and their culture of learning.
There are two important aspects underpinning this line of thought. First, since thinking is closely related to culture, custom, norms and values, it is inappropriate to use a Western philosophy of thinking to understand the learning of Asian students. Second, there is a misinterpretation of what the Confucian philosophy of thinking and teaching thinking skills is, with Confucian cultural heritage long being criticized for focusing on memorizing, rote learning and reproducing knowledge. Confucian educational philosophy has been practised and passed on for over 2500 years (Sun, 2008) and the importance of exploring teaching for thinking from this perspective lies in its potential to offer a much better informed and more holistic understanding of the concept of thinking that is predominant in Confucian-heritage culture.

This chapter therefore aims to broaden and deepen the current discussion on teaching thinking skills by providing insight into Confucian educational philosophy in order to present alternative thinking that is promoted in an Asian context. In order to do so, I will first briefly describe how Chinese learners, who are often described as learners following Confucian philosophy, are depicted in the literature. Second, I discuss Confucian educational philosophy, and examine the educational principles and thinking underlying Confucian philosophy, with specific reference to reflective thinking. Finally, I illustrate how Confucian thinking is expressed in contemporary Chinese education.

**Chinese learners and their culture of learning**

Harris (1995: 87) writes, ‘[F]ar Eastern students . . . are happier with memorising and reproducing information than with problem-oriented and more active teaching strategies’. Chinese learners are depicted in the literature as obedient, rote and passive learners who rely on repetition, who do not engage in independent learning, who are extrinsically motivated and who merely reproduce knowledge as per examination requirements (see Gu, 2003; J. Li, 2003). This view is labelled as ‘the deficit model . . . discourse attributed to Confucian cultural heritage (CCH)’, which entails learning as ‘passive, lacking critical thinking, reliant on simplistic rote memorization strategies resulting in surface learning, unwilling to participate in classroom talk’ (Clark & Gieve, 2006: 54).

The simplistic notion that Confucian philosophy places emphasis on knowledge mastery through rote learning, memorizing and repetition is in stark contrast to the reality that Chinese students compete well with other students academically. Watkins and Biggs (2001) observed the seeming contradiction between the claims that Confucian-heritage learning is not conducive to good learning yet Chinese students outperform Western students, at least in science and mathematics, and have deeper, meaning-oriented approaches to learning. Logic suggests that Chinese learners must have good thinking skills to be able to succeed academically as all disciplines require high levels of thinking skills, such as problem solving collaboratively and thinking ‘outside the box’. Watkins and Biggs (2001) called the apparent contradiction of rote learning and so on vs. deep learning, the paradox of Chinese learning. Such observations beg the question: if Chinese learners do engage in higher-order thinking, what differentiates Chinese thinking from Western thinking? Is there a relationship between Chinese thinking and Confucian philosophy at all?

More recently, different voices and views have emerged in the literature to suggest that thinking is indeed a key element of Confucian philosophy (see for example, Li & Wegerif, 2014; Starr, 2012; Zhao & Biester, 2011). The following sections explore the nature of this philosophy and its influence on learning and teaching in contemporary China.

**Confucian philosophy of learning**

If, as I argue, Confucian philosophy does not advocate learning as mastery of the customs, habits and practice, as is widely presented in the literature, what does it actually emphasize? Does
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Confucius promote reasoning and thinking? If so, what kind of thinking does he advocate and what it is like? To answer these questions, the first step is to understand what learning is from a Confucian perspective.

Kong Qiu (or Kong Fu Zi; Confucius)\(^1\) (551–479 BC) was an educator, philosopher and politician in China during the Spring and Autumn Period.\(^2\) Confucius’s contributions to Chinese society are summarized by Sun (2004: 78–79):

At least four of his innovations have remained permanent features of Chinese civilization: (1) The creation of the role of the private teacher and the idea and practice of lifelong learning; (2) The creation and establishment of the content of education, its methods, and the ideals; (3) The broad application of liberal arts learning; and (4) the acceptance of students of all social backgrounds, with clearly established principles for doing so. Moreover, he taught social reform by moral suasion, not by revolution.

Confucius set the tone for education in China in a number of important ways and continues to have a significant influence on modern educational principles. His educational philosophy is very sophisticated and is recorded as The Analects: a collection of his conversations with his disciples and between his disciples. Most of his sayings are metaphorical and can be interpreted in different ways. Despite this hermeneutic complexity the following Confucian educational beliefs are well-recognized in principle:

- The purpose of education is to achieve humanity through self-cultivation. Moral training is the most important part of education and such knowledge cannot remain in academic contexts but must be displayed in behaviour.
- Learning is a lifelong course and education should be open to all. Everyone should be equal in receiving education regardless of their background.
- Thinking is important for learning, and cannot be separated from learning.

**The purpose of education**

For Confucius, the ultimate goal of education and learning is to cultivate oneself to become a person of quality (Rén/Jen) with perfect virtue and high standard moral values. An individual who exhibits Rén is a Jun Zi, who is considered to be an ideal person or sage. The value of Rén lies at the heart of education and learning and the formal method for pursuing this personal refinement and self-articulation is Li, a ritual practice or propriety. Becoming a Jun Zi takes place at a social level and it is not an individual’s deeds but how the person acts within a community. Propriety, which includes every aspect of life, is therefore the underlying syntax of this community. Starr (2012: 25) describes sagehood as ‘a state of oneness with the mind of the universe, evidenced by wisdom and morality’. Sun (2008) elaborates Confucius’s idea of becoming a Jun Zi and provides a description of the three characteristics that a Jun Zi should attain: (a) the undivided ‘I’ with the universe, (b) the unity of ‘I’ with other human beings, and (c) the wholeness of ‘I’ with ‘self’ (see also Zhao & Biesta, 2011). For both Starr (2012) and Sun (2004), the undivided ‘I’ with the universe is evidence of attaining sagehood. However, Li and Wegerif (2014) argue the use of the term ‘undivided’ is misleading as Confucius did not wish to claim that he or any other Jun Zi was the universe in any simple sense. His concern was with Rén, which is about acting in a way that takes into account the interests of the whole and is not simply acting out of narrow self-interest.

For Confucius, a Jun Zi is also someone who ‘does not seek to satiate himself in eating, does not seek ease in living, is quick in his dealings and prudent in speech, and keeps to the correctness
of those with the way. He can be considered as devoted to learning’ (Confucius, 2000, 1:14).
Confucius illustrates what being a Jun Zi entails – it’s not about gaining wholeness with the universe, but being someone who is honest, gains respect and corrects his or her behaviour accordingly. Only by doing so, can one then engage in deep learning and achieve humanity.
On the other hand, although Confucius preaches the joys of a simple life, he does not condemn the quest for material success. However, he argues that this must not be at the expense of moral behaviour: ‘With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink and with a bent arm for a pillow, there is still joy. Wealth and honour obtained through unrighteousness are but floating clouds to me’ (Analects 7:15). (子曰：‘飯疏食，飲水，曲肱而枕之，樂亦在其中矣。不義而富且貴，於我如浮雲。’). Thus, having high moral values is more important than anything else, such as nice food, an easy life and fortune.

As the discussion above implies, the concept of Rén (Jen) or ‘perfect virtue’ has multiple meanings and interpretations. Rén is not to be understood as an object in the world that can be defined and measured but is perhaps best viewed as a positive orientation towards others, and towards otherness, characterized by a sense of unity (love) and constructive participation (reciprocity). Confucius believed that the great principle of reciprocity is the rule of life and this philosophy was reflected in his conversation with his disciples. ‘Tsze-kung asked, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?” The Master said, “Is not RECIPROCITY such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others”’ (Analects 15:23) (子貢問曰：‘有一言而可以終身行之者乎?’ 子曰：‘其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。’). One interpretation of this is to see it as advocating a process of repositioning, that is, to see things from a different perspective. Repositioning oneself arguably shares similarities with what is more commonly termed creativity – from multiple perspectives and with multiple solutions. Hence, ‘Rén is not far off; he who seeks it has already found it’ (Do-Dinh, 1969: 107).
The Confucian ideal and ultimate goal is to ‘cultivate oneself and bring peace and happiness to the whole populace’ (Analects 14:42). For Confucius, ‘humanity’, a concept with extremely abundant connotations, takes ‘benevolence’ as its key concept (Hall & Ames, 1998). He believed that almost all are capable of improving themselves through education in order to reach humanity: ‘Only the most intelligent and the most stupid do not change’ (Analects 17:3) (子曰：‘唯上知與下愚不移。’). From his perspective, people can be classified into four categories when referring to learning and knowledge:

Those who are born with the possession of knowledge are the highest class of men. Those who learn, and so, readily, get possession of knowledge, are the next. Those who are dull and stupid, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these. As to those who are dull and stupid and yet do not learn – they are the lowest of the people.

(Analects 16:9)

(孔子曰：‘生而知之者，上也。學而知之者，次也。困而學之，又其次也。困而不學，民斯為下矣!’)

He takes himself as an example of what education can do to a person: ‘The Master said, “I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there”’ (Analects 7:19) (子曰：‘我非生而知之者。好古，敏以求之者也。’). Confucius concedes that his knowledge is not connate and puts himself in the second group of people, believing instead that self-cultivation is lifelong, despite being acknowledged as one of the most knowledgeable people in the world then and since. He set a high standard in learning and gaining knowledge with great eagerness, and in combining studying with
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thinking. This also demonstrates his humble attitudes towards learning and self-effacement. Self-cultivation and self-discipline are important methods for achieving humanity and he exemplifies the principles of self-cultivation thus:

If Jun Zi is not grave or behaves respectably, he will not be dignified, hence his learning is only superficial. Focus on sincerity and trustworthiness; do not associate with individuals who are morally worse than you. If mistakes are made, do not be afraid to correct them.

(Analects 1:8)

(子曰：‘君子不重則不威，學則不固，主忠信，無友不如己者，過則勿憚改。’)

Tsze-hsiâ, one of Confucius’s disciples, demonstrated his understanding of the substance of learning:

If a man withdraws his mind from the love of beauty, and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous; if, in serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength; if, in serving his prince, he can devote his life; if, in his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere – although men say that he has not learned, I will certainly say that he has.

(Analects 1:7)

(子夏曰：‘賢賢易色；事父母，能竭其力；事君，能致其身；與朋友交，言而有信。雖曰未學，吾必謂之學矣。’)

Tsze-hsiâ in this instance is able to apply achieving humanity in everyday practice to his understanding of what learning means. Note that he places no emphasis on knowledge acquisition.

The importance of cultivating moral values is also reflected in Confucius’s philosophy of governing the country. Central to his political reform was the precept ‘to govern with morality’. Confucius claimed: ‘A sovereign who exercises government on moral principles may be likened to the pole-star, which holds its place while all the lesser stars revolve around it’ (Analects 2:1)

(子曰：‘為政以德，譬如北辰居其所而眾星共之。’). He contended that:

Regulated by the edicts and punishments, the people will know only how to stay out of trouble but will not have a sense of shame. Guided by virtues and the rites, they will not only have a sense of shame but also know to correct their mistakes of their own accord.

(Analects 2:3)

(子曰：‘道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥。道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。’)

Simply put, Confucius’s philosophy of governing is to love others; to honour one’s parents; to do what is right instead of what is to one’s exclusive advantage; to practise reciprocity; and to rule by moral example instead of force and violence (Littrell, 2005). Confucius therefore does not emphasize obtaining knowledge but developing a good quality of a person, to have good moral value. One who holds good moral value is not only regarded as a knowledgeable person but also a good ruler. His philosophy is based on humanism, harmony and hierarchy, which can be interpreted as developing virtuous conduct through education, avoiding extremism and being willing to compromise, aiming for the middle way, and knowing one’s place and behaving accordingly. At face value it is easy to see how such precepts might be misinterpreted by researchers to suggest that Confucian-heritage learners are obedient, do not engage in critical
thinking and passively follow teachers’ instructions. However, as mentioned above, the quality of such learners’ performance belies such a simplistic analysis.

In the West, Dewey’s ideas about education are to some extent similar to those of Confucius, though Dewey did not explicitly write about self-cultivation, nor did he highlight the importance of moral value. For Dewey, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but the realization of one’s full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. He notes that ‘to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities’ (Dewey, 1897: 78). The difference between Dewey and Confucius is that the former emphasizes learning at the practical level whereas the latter emphasizes learning as a process of becoming a person of quality. Although Confucius clearly valued knowledge he did not see knowledge as an end in itself but as a means to self-cultivation to become the sort of person who is able to act wisely in the best interests of all:

Though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when instructed with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?

(Confucius, 1893, 13:5)

(子曰：‘诵诗三百，授之以政，不达，使于四方，不能专对，虽多，亦奚以为?’)

The idea of learning for instrumental purposes is highlighted in this saying and the contemporary Chinese education motto ‘learn to use’ is derived from here.

**Education for all**

Confucius believed that education should be for all and nobody should be excluded or disadvantaged regardless of their social background and cognitive ability. It is about equality in education, as he made explicit in a conversation with one of his disciples: ‘In teaching there should be no distinction of classes’ (Analects 15:38) (子曰：‘有教无类。’). In fact, Confucius advocates treating all people who are willing to learn in the same manner, and giving them equal opportunities to learn, because he believed that education can change people and help them to develop good qualities. ‘The Master said: “From the man bringing his bundle of dried flesh for my teaching upwards, I have never refused instruction to anyone”’ (Analects 7:7) (子曰：‘自行束脩以上，吾未嘗無誨焉。’). This is a strong reflection of Confucius’s educational beliefs, and underpinning this was his understanding of achieving humanity through learning.

**Learning and thinking**

According to Confucian-heritage philosophy, learning, as described above, is not simply acquiring knowledge, but is a way to engage in self-cultivation to become a Jun Zi or to have perfect virtue. Therefore, learning to become a Jun Zi does not mean acquiring a set of skills or knowledge but developing an attitude which enables one to relate to human society. From a Confucian perspective, thinking cannot be separated from learning and the importance of thinking is highlighted thus: ‘Learning without thinking is a vain effort. Thinking without learning is a dangerous effort’ (Analects 2:15) (子曰：‘学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆。’). In The Analects, and contrary to much Western literature, there is very little about memorization.
Instead, what Confucius advocated is constant reflective thinking. It can be argued that thinking and learning is a unitary concept and that we should not focus only on one area.

Reflective thinking underpinned Confucius's own teaching practice as he encouraged his disciples to be critical and open-minded. He demanded challenges and questions from his disciples and rejected obedient, passive learning. Although he valued the wisdom of the past he did not advocate accepting ancient ideas blindly or unquestioningly. He criticized passive learning by defining himself as ‘one who through my admiration of antiquity is keen to discover things’ (*Analects* 7:19) (我非生而知之者，好古，敏以求之者也). He considered students who do not raise questions or think over what he teaches to be dull-witted. This is illustrated in his observation on Yan Hui’s learning. Confucius said:

> For a whole day, I converse with Hui who, as though dull-witted, did not contradict me. I reflected on his personal conduct after we had parted company, and found it sufficiently expressive. Hui is not dull-witted after all.

(*Analects* 2:9)

This educational philosophy of challenging authority underpins Confucian teaching and continues to influence contemporary education in China. However, the thinking that Confucius advocates and practises is different from critical thinking or creative thinking as it is known in the West. It is reflective and correlative thinking, in which one relates learning to doing and to being in real-life.

In the West, reflection is also encouraged and considered to be an important element of the learning process. However, there is no precise definition for reflective thinking and in many cases it means thinking about thinking, which has a similar meaning to another important area of thinking skills: metacognition. The closest use of reflection in modern education perhaps is reflectiveness as used in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In PISA, reflectiveness is recognized as the heart of the key competencies students need to acquire near the end of compulsory schooling for full participation in society. It suggests that ‘reflectiveness implies the use of metacognitive skills (thinking about thinking), creative abilities and taking a critical stance’ (OECD, n.d.: 9). Reflective thinking in the West therefore recognizes how the individual uses thinking to construct their experience, to relate the new to the known, to take different perspectives and to make independent judgements. Reflection by implication involves critical thinking to make good judgements and good decisions. Critical thinking is frequently understood as a property or skill of the individual without reference to relationship and responsibility to others. In the cognitive psychology approach to teaching thinking skills the focus is on cognitive skills, such as being critical, which are usually seen as properties of individuals (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 1999). In some approaches these individual skills are augmented by habits and dispositions, which also tend to be conceived of as individual (Costa & Kallick, 2000).

Reflective thinking from a Confucian perspective, however, is different from that followed in the Western approach. For Confucius, reflective thinking is conducted at two levels:

(a) reflection on the materials of knowledge in order to synthesize and systematize the raw materials into a whole, and to integrate them into oneself as wisdom; (b) reflection on oneself, first in order to ensure that such synthesis, systematization and integration proceed in an open-minded, fair and autonomous way, and, second, in order to integrate knowledge with the self, thus internalizing it until it becomes oneself.

(Kim, 2003: 82)
Confucius believed in the role of reflection in learning and expected his disciples to engage in active reflection. ‘The Master said, “If I raise one angel and they do not come back with the other three angels, I will not repeat myself!”’ (Confucius, 2000, 7:8) (子曰：‘不憤不啟，不悱不發。舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也。’). His disciples are required to reflect on what Confucius teaches them in order to come back to him with ideas and questions of their own. What counts for learning from a Confucian perspective is the ability to identify and discover new meanings from the existing knowledge. In other words, the challenging of old traditions and knowledge or giving them new meanings is considered to be learning. The one who engages in reflective learning is a knowledgeable one and should be considered as a ‘knower’, as the Master said: ‘If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others’ (Analects 2:11) (子曰：‘温故而知新，可以为师矣。’).

As stated earlier, one form of reflection sounds similar to contemporary ideas of metacognition, including identifying one’s own learning attitudes, weakness and strengths. For Confucius, knowing one’s state of knowledge is fundamental in learning. He says, ‘what you know, you know, what you don’t know, you don’t know. This is knowledge’ (Confucius, 2000, 2:17) (子曰：‘由，誨女知之乎！知之為知之，不知為不知，是知也。’). Here the emphasis is not on knowledge as acquiring information to become more knowledgeable, but on developing awareness of one’s knowledge.

Reflection also involves challenging other people’s views and learning from peers. Confucius encourages his disciples to engage in critical thinking about what he taught them rather than blindly accepting it. If there is something students can discover from learning the old knowledge, Confucius encourages them to share it. The principle of being humble and respecting the old knowledge but at the same time being courageous enough to develop new meanings lies at the heart of the Confucian perspective on learning. One illustration of this point is that he encouraged his disciples not to be obedient to the teacher. ‘The Master said, “Let every man consider virtue as what devolves on himself. He may not yield the performance of it even to his teacher”’ (Analects 15:35) (子曰：‘當仁，不讓於師。’). As we have already noted, Confucius never considered himself to be perfect in virtue and he engaged in learning and reflection continuously. ‘The Master said, “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them”’ (Confucius, 1893, 7:21) (子曰：‘三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。’). Learning from each other again is the outcome of reflection. One of his disciples, Tsang, is said to have examined himself daily on three points: ‘whether in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful; whether, in dealing with friends, I may not have been true; whether I may not have mastered and practised the instruction of my teacher?’ (Confucius, 1893, 1:4) (曾子曰：‘吾日三省吾身：為人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？’). Confucius also made it clear that he practised such reflection himself. ‘The Master said “When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves”’ (Confucius, 1893, 4:17) (子曰：‘見賢思齊焉，見不賢而內自省也。’). It is clear that reflection plays a significant role in self-cultivation to develop humanity and become a quality person.

Reflective thinking can also be silent. One characteristic of Chinese learners, which is often recorded in Western literature, is that they are silent. It is the case that there are many references to the danger of speaking incautiously throughout The Analects but this silence is actually valued as an indication of the importance of reflecting before speaking. Silent reflection can happen at different levels. Confucius proposed a view of thinking as silent ‘inner’ dialogue with multiple virtual voices, including the voice of the universe. He taught thinking by promoting this kind of reflection indirectly – silence is not seen as individual reflection but as something much more than individual.
The Master said: ‘I would prefer not speaking.’

Tsze-Kung said: ‘If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?’

The Master said: ‘Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses and all things are continually being produced but does heaven say anything?’

(Confucius, 1893, 17:19)

In other words Confucius assumed a relational self or a self that only exists as an emergent property of relationships. He saw education as a means to improve the quality of relationships not only with specific others but also with the horizon of otherness (what Sun refers to as ‘the universe’) (Li & Wegerif, 2014). Therefore, reflective thinking is correlative in nature. In practice, Sun (2008) suggests productive silent reflection consists of three elements: first a person should be questioning themselves and their motives from different perspectives; second, one thinks about the interests of the community; and finally, one tries to understand the larger point of view of the universe.

**Lifelong learning and thinking**

One of contributions of Confucius to education is his idea of lifelong learning, which still influences today’s China. For Confucius, learning is a process of self-cultivation to become a Jun Zi, which should be lifelong. Confucius exhibited an example of character through his own conduct of lifelong learning and cultivation. He said:

At the age of 15, I determined and devoted myself to learning; at 30, I was established in my profession; at 40, my doubts faded; at 50 I fully committed to my granted mission by heaven; at 60 my ear was attuned; at 70, I followed my heart/desire without overstepping the mark.

(Analects 2:4)

Learning was Confucius’s lifelong task – a process of developing thinking at different stages of life. He divided the learning process into three critical stages: from 15 to 40 years of age, a period in which one should accumulate knowledge; and from 40 to 70 years, a period of learning not to be manipulated by the environment. The final stage is when one is beyond 70 years of age, when a person should be able to integrate subjectivity and be self-regulated, which is not far away from being in a state of perfect virtue. The autobiography recorded here suggests that learning happens in two distinctive forms. One is accumulation of knowledge (through transmission) and the other is discovering knowledge (through reflection). The accumulation was necessary and important for Confucius in order to be able to engage in reflection.
Confucian philosophy and contemporary education

Confucius’s approach to education promotes a number of significant concepts that are still evident in the psyche of Chinese culture (Li & Wegerif, 2014; Zhao & Biester, 2011), among which the most widely discussed include what constitutes knowledge and learning; teachers’ and learners’ roles in the process of learning; and pedagogy. These and other facets of Chinese educational culture are elaborated below.

Moral education and inner satisfaction

In contemporary Chinese education, moral education is still the most important educational objective. In a school, class time is allocated for moral education through reflection. Students are encouraged to relate what they learn to their everyday practice. In particular, in the reflection children learn how to strive for ‘inner satisfaction’ by thinking of self in relation to others and the community they are in. In practice, this concern with inner satisfaction is translated into being honest, keeping one’s promises, practising what one preaches and being responsible. This philosophy is advocated throughout education and is known as an educational motto by all primary and secondary school pupils. In schools, students who achieve good academic results but cannot demonstrate ‘inner satisfaction’ are not considered as merit students.

Collective identity

One important element of developing humanity is to relate oneself to the society and community in which one practises. First, people are expected to behave appropriately and obey the social rules. Second, people are expected to place their own interests in relation to the interests of the group, the class, the school, the society and the country. Acts of sacrificing the little self to serve what is referred to as ‘the big self’ or ‘social self’ are valued and recognized. The premise here is that selfishness is the greatest obstacle to the realization of one’s social self as personal fulfilment is structured and shaped by familial, communal, political and even cosmic order. In school, children are encouraged to think about others when making decisions and put the collective interests in the first place. Chinese education advocates ‘self-criticism and peer criticism’ to cultivate deep moral values. Self-interest is not encouraged.

Differentiation

Teaching according to ability is a shared education vision among Chinese teachers and it is widely practised throughout education. In practice, it is interpreted as teaching according to students’ needs and situation. The depth, coverage of content and curriculum are all guided by this principle.

Respect the old knowledge, discover new meanings

In school, learning means developing attitudes and abilities of relating knowledge and discovering new meanings from it. This involves two levels of learning: accumulating and understanding the old knowledge, and critiquing and developing the old knowledge. In the first stage, respecting existing knowledge and tradition is desired and, therefore, learning the meaning through memorizing is observed. In the second stage, developing new ideas can be achieved through critical analysis and reflection. Chinese education believes in the importance of revising and respecting old knowledge in order to find new meanings. Children are expected to revise what
they learn after class and preview what they will learn the next day to understand the relationship between the old and the new. It is recognized as a useful and effective learning strategy.

**The role of memorization and repetition**

The ‘deficit model’ (Clark & Gieve, 2006) perception cited earlier is being overturned. Although the literature has observed evidence of Chinese learners doing repetition and memorization, what they engage in this process is more than rote learning. ‘Repetition’ plays a role in consolidation and building understanding (Watkins, 2000: 165–166). The suggestion is that memorization is not merely a surface-level learning device. In fact some scholars claim there are two types of memorization: mechanical memorization, and memorization with understanding (Gu, 2003: 74). Jin and Cortazzi (2006: 14) mention that in the ‘changing practices of Chinese cultures of learning . . . there is . . . stress on deep learning which goes beyond memorising or recitation to practical application, through reflective study and high achievement motivation with disciplined effort’. Watkins’s (2000: 165) meta-analysis of the research literature would suggest that ‘memorizing and understanding . . . [are] . . . interlocking processes’. In practice, Chinese learners adopt a methodical series of steps (J. Li, 2003: 131): they initially commit the material to memory; next they seek to understand the intention, style and meaning of the material. They then try to apply their understanding to situations that call for use of such knowledge, and finally they enter a deeper level of questioning and modification of the original material. Whereas the last step in their approach is verbally interactive by nature, the first three steps may call for more solitary learning and contemplation.

**Reflection and silent engagement**

Encouraging children to ‘digest’ knowledge by ‘thinking and reflecting internally’ is common. Reflection takes place in two different forms. First, children engage in reflection through self-appraisal and peer evaluation in a small group. The focus is usually on the rectification of misbehaviour and appropriate conduct of group work (Fung, 2014). Second, students conduct silent reflection, which is hard to illustrate or observe. In the literature, we see Chinese students are silent in class, which could be explained as them engaging in silent reflection. The practice of not voicing views in class is connected to ideas of being responsible and inner reflection. Specifically, children are taught from early years to engage in deeper thinking and reflection before speaking up. The frequently repeated advice to ‘think three times before you act (speak)’ is advocated by teachers and taken up by students. The idea is that they should engage in silent inner dialogue before engaging in active outer dialogue. Being responsible is linked to the idea of inner reflection as learners are expected to be responsible for their own learning and also for those others who are involved in their learning (e.g. peers and teachers). Chinese learners are thus observed not to raise questions because they are (a) engaging in inner reflection and (b) relating their own individual needs and voices to the collective interests (relating to otherness – universe). However, this does not mean that children are not encouraged to challenge, rather, they are encouraged to challenge only in a responsible manner and only after reflection.

**Dialogic teaching**

Chinese teaching can be considered as dialogic teaching in which multiple voices are valued and inner reflection (dialogic) is encouraged. Dialogic teaching has three characteristics: first, reflective thinking plays an important role in this process; second, multiple voices and views are
valued; and third, inner dialogues and relating to otherness is necessary. The first two characteristics are often observed through classroom interaction with examples of referential questions, extended wait time and using a series of questions (e.g. L. Li, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter attempts to explore the relevance of Confucian philosophy to contemporary Chinese education and make a link between the Chinese culture of learning and the Confucian perspective on learning. This chapter argues that the Chinese style of thinking is reflective, largely based on a Confucian philosophical stance. Reflective thinking is different from critical thinking, creative thinking or the other types of thinking that are emphasized in Western culture, yet it shares similarities with them. Reflective thinking involves silent inner reflection, self and peer evaluation, knowing self (metacognition), multiple voices and perspectives. It requires thinking in relation to others (community) and it is correlative – it is a vital instrument to achieve inner satisfaction and high moral value. Such thinking might not be easily observed but is a well-proven and successful vehicle for deep learning and high performance. The Confucian model of teaching thinking outlined in this chapter offers an indigenous approach to teaching thinking that could be taken up within China to improve the education system in preference to importing models of teaching thinking from other cultures which might not work in China.

Notes

1 Fu Zi following one’s last name is an honorific equivalent to ‘Master’.
2 This was a period in Chinese history that took place from approximately 771 BC until 476 BC (or by some authorities until 403 BC).

References


