Rediscover Lasting Values: Western and East Asian Cultural Learning Models in the 21st Century

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Is this square then, which is four times as big, its double?
  * No, by Zeus
How many times bigger is it?
  * Four times
Then, my boy, the figure based on a line twice the length is not double but four times as big?
  * You are right ....
The boy is an illiterate slave boy
The tutor is Socrates, who demonstrates human innate knowledge that is not taught but recalled
Socratic Ideas About Learning

The external world is the object of learning.

Learning is inquiring into the world for oneself.

The human mind is supreme in this inquiry.

Perplexity about the world is the drive for human search and discovery of knowledge.

One derives intrinsic enjoyment and pleasure in this process.

The purpose of such learning is to produce objective knowledge -- truth.
Your Majesty, is it true that you spared an ox from being sacrificed because you couldn’t bear to see it shrink in fear?

- Yes, it was like an innocent man going to the place of execution.

Then, your Majesty possesses compassion!

- Do you really think so?

Yes, but you should extend it to care for your people instead of waging wars against other states. You will gain respect and a following and become a true king.

- Marvelous! I’d like to learn more about this....

The tutee is a king.

The tutor is Mencius whom the King asks how to secure his political dominance over other states. The King who used to believe the only way to be king is to be ruthless now contemplates his goodness....
Mencian Ideas About Learning

- Self (not the external world) is the object of learning.
- This learning begins at recognizing one’s constant need to become a better person; no one, not even the king is exempt.
- The pursuit of learning enables and dignifies powerless individuals (who are legitimimized to challenge the otherwise powerful).
- Learning is a lifelong process.
- It requires continuous commitment.
- The purpose of learning is not to produce objective knowledge but to cultivate/perfect oneself morally.
Research Points to Lasting Impact

Research over past 3 decades finds lasting impact of both cultural learning models.

- Words people use to describe learning concepts
- Model learner images people hold in their minds
- Descriptions of self as a learner
- Endorsement of learning statements
- Responses to experimental manipulations
- Thoughts/feelings from face-to-face interviews
Research over past 3 decades finds lasting impact of both cultural learning models.

- Children’s stories about learning
- Recorded parent-child conversations about learning
- Video-taped parent-teaching-child sessions
- Home observations of parent-child interactions
- Students’ images of good teachers
- Classroom teaching and teacher beliefs
Example of Research Findings

- Understand
- Self-perfect
- Thinking/inquiry
- Learning Virtues

EA
Chinese
Five Core Emphases in Each Model

**Western Mind-Orientation**
1) Understand the world
2) Seek certainty of knowledge
3) Develop/use the mind
4) Inquire by curiosity/interest
5) Express oneself

**Confucian Virtue-Orientation**
1) Perfect self
2) Take the world upon oneself
3) Acquire/embody learning virtues
4) Learn by humility/respect
5) Speak less but do more
Understand the World in the West

Greek antiquity
Judeo-Christian tradition
Philosophy
Science

External world
- Physical world
- Divine world
- Social world
- Psychological world

....
Perfect Self in Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC)

- Taoism and Buddhism
- Most influential: Confucianism
  - *ren* (jen), 仁
    - A lifelong striving to become the most genuine, sincere, and humane person one can be
    - Not cognitive but moral in nature
    - Human perfectibility is possible only by one’s *learning*
  - *Junzi* 君子
    - Those who commit themselves to *ren*
    - *Junzi* is a human ideal in CHC
Seek Certainty of Knowledge in the West

- Logical/mathematical/deductive reasoning
- Inductive reasoning also relies on logical rigor
- Philosophy
- Theology
- Natural science
- Social science

► Purpose of/standard for disciplined work
Social responsibility of the learner
Learners bear moral duty
Life path to pursue:
- Investigate things
- Extend knowledge
- Be sincere
- Rectify the mind
- Cultivate self
- Organize family
- Order the state
- Bring peace to the world

► Ultimate goal for the learner
Develop and Use Mind in the West

- Mind enables learning
- Innate human faculty and intelligence
- Mind also develops
- Mind’s wonders enable one to
  - Get essence of things
  - Learn without being taught
  - Abstract things from experience
  - Construct a world for oneself
  - ….

- Ongoing research and debate on mental functions
- Cracking the mind is unlocking human potential
Acquire and Embody Learning Virtues in CHC

- Earnestness/sincerity
- Diligence/self-exertion
- Endurance of hardship
- Perseverance
- Concentration

Once acquired, they last for a life time
Inquire by Curiosity and Interest in the West

Supremacy of children’s
- Curiosity
- Interest
- Spontaneity
- Intrinsic motivation
- Enjoyment

Believed to underlie
- Motivation
- Self-directed learning
- Sustaining power

These lead to exploration and discovery of particular tasks of inquiry
Inquire by Respect and Humility in CHC

- Conviction for long-term goals rather than feelings at moment
- Force self to learn when faced with boredom/disinterest
- Aim for triumph over self
- Respect and emulate teachers and peers
- Humility/self-guard against personal conceit

► These lead to continuous self-improvement regardless of high or low achievement
Express Oneself in the West

Verbal eloquence since Greek time
- Distinct personal quality
- A right
- A leadership trait
- Art

Conversational rules
- Speak no more and no less
- Speak truth and avoid falsehood
- Speak to the point
- Speak directly

Authorship of expressions in classroom
Devil’s advocate from childhood on
- Speakership privileged
Speak Less but Do More in CHC

Distrust in speaking as a means for worthy ends
- Glib tongue divorces the able mind from the feeling heart
- Flattering speech undermines sincerity
- Boastful speech lacks humility

Speaker’s burden
- Moral concern
  - Self-cultivation measured by what one does, not what one says
  - Struggle between one’s words and deeds
  - Speaking reflects not just one’s cognition, but more importantly, one’s moral quality
  - Great caution needed in speaking

Social concern → Context-sensitive
Personal concern → Personal liability
Speak Less but Do More in CHC 2

Conversational rules
- Speak little
- Speak ambiguously
- Speak indirectly
- Listen before speaking

Focus on content, not authorship of ideas in classroom

Reluctant speaker from childhood on

Listenership privileged

Example: the Nobel Laureate Mo Yan. His penname means "Don’t Speak" to honor his mother’s wish for him to grow up speaking little but doing more
Rediscover Lasting Values in the West?

If still upheld, they are lasting. Why then rediscover?
We know they are lasting
  • Because research informs us
  • If not, we may not know well
We are led to believe that
  • Future holds more promise than past
  • The US is a youthful and most creative culture
But its foundation rests on a long intellectual tradition
Lasting only among privileged children?
Can other children also benefit from them?
How can education deliver them to everyone?
Rediscover Lasting Values in CHC?

Greater need in East Asia, particularly China

- Initial self-blame turned to ambivalence for 150 years
- Chinese regions tried to abandon Confucian values
- China’s Cultural Revolution aimed to do just that
- Yet research shows lasting values
- Thanks to persistent efforts from parents and communities
- But serious neglect in formal education and public discourse

Current signs for government/public reception toward the return

How to provide opportunities for children to learn about, not merely live, their own cultural heritage?

Paradox: Why do they have to wait to go abroad to study their lasting values?
Both Models Are Here to Stay

- Socrates is still alive and well in the West, so is Confucius in East Asia
- Not easy to get rid of them even when we try
- But before we try again, think again
- The two models unlikely to merge into each other but retain their distinctions
- Need to recognize their lasting power
- Need to integrate it into their respective education practice
Possible for Cultures to Learn from Each Other?

East Asia has been engaged in learning from the West for nearly two centuries
- In many ways successful, e.g., science, technology, commerce, and not trivially, democracy
- In other ways not so, e.g., challenging authority, unconventional thinking, and radical creativity like Newton, Einstein, and Steve Jobs

The West has learned little from East Asia
- Asian students’ high achievement is clear
- Asian immigrant children benefit from both models
Possible Steps Toward Cross-Cultural Learning

One model’s merit appears to be the other’s weakness

Time to widen and deepen mutual learning?

If so, true cross-cultural learning requires
- Thorough understanding of each other
- Identification of shared values
- Documentation of successful learners of both models
- Description of possible processes

But not to cost each other’s core values
As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own.

~Margaret Mead