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# A CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TERTIARY EDUCATION FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## 儒家“天下为公”的高等教育观

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### ABSTRACT

Confucian education is best captured by the programme described in the *Great Learning*. Education is presented first as the process of self-cultivation for the sake of developing virtuous character. Self-cultivation then allows for virtue to be cultivated in the familial, social and international dimensions. My central thesis is that Confucianism can serve as a universal framework of educating people for the common good in its promotion of personal cultivation for the sake of human progress. On this account the common good specifically refers to the social order accomplished by the virtuous behaviour found in the members of society. In this paper I argue that the Confucian notion of “lesser learning” sheds light on the concept of general education and the notion of “greater learning” improves our understanding of liberal education. Under this analysis the necessity of general education is assured although its importance should not be overly exaggerated. Furthermore, the objectives of liberal education deserve greater emphasis due to their historical importance and enduring relevance to promoting the common good of universal humanity.

## CONFUCIAN NOTION OF THE COMMON GOOD

Globalisation today refers to the integration of economies and cultures enabled by technological advancements. But a genuinely integrated international community can only come about through the mutual sharing of the wisdom and values between great civilisations. Since he became President, Xi Jinping has continually spoken of the task “to build a community of common destiny” which can only be achieved by learning from and developing with one another (2017). Having a common destiny suggests that all human beings are striving after the same goals. Arguably this is an attempt to articulate a vision of a common good for the whole human race today.

In the Confucian worldview human beings are essentially social creatures. Indeed, the family is the primary setting for human life and development. The goodness of the individual person, the goodness of society and even the goodness of human life itself are deeply intertwined. The short-term goal is for the individual to take the necessary steps to acquire virtue by self-cultivation. But the long-term goal is ultimately to accomplish the global common good by the installation of a stable and virtuous world order. Thus, the Confucian conception of the common good is essentially social in nature. In a contemporary formulation: “the common good of society is a well-established basic societal order in which everyone can benefit and flourish in pursuing the good life” (Fan, 2014, p. 200). Recently scholars have begun to incorporate a Chinese approach in their thinking about educational theory (Eng, 2012). The importance of Confucian values to pedagogy has also been studied (Tan, 2013). As the relevance of Confucianism to the study of education has been established, it is now time to proceed to a brief account of the development of general education from liberal education.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION

The ideal of liberal education has been greatly influential in the history of educational

philosophy within Western perspectives. Since the ideal of liberal education is to develop the potential of human beings to their greatest capacity, a broad range of topics needs to be covered. The medieval Christian educational system formulated the seven liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. In modern educational terms these seven liberal arts would include both the humanities and the sciences. The term ‘general education’ was only used in the American educational system beginning in the nineteenth century. Compared to the concept of ‘liberal education’ the concept of ‘general education’ is a relatively new invention (Leung, 2013, p. 49). Liberal education still plays a major role in higher education in the world today. For example, there are still a good number of liberal arts colleges in the United States. In the Chinese context, Lingnan University in Hong Kong operates on the model of a liberal arts college.

The transition from liberal education to general education occurred during the shift in the mission of the university in society at large during the late nineteenth century. The university began as a place for the education of a privileged few and evolved into an institution for training a large number of people for a wide variety of professions. From being a place dedicated to the intellectual development of scholars, the university was called to become an institution for creating new knowledge as a form of service to the general population (Leung, 2013, p. 47). On the one hand, the content of *liberal* education tends to be traditional and philosophical in character, with an emphasis on the intrinsic value of knowledge. On the other hand, the content of *general* education tends to be practical and scientific in character, with an emphasis on the instrumental value of knowledge (Leung, 2013, p. 48). Furthermore, the relationship between general education and liberal education is analogous to the relationship between a part and a whole. In other words, general education is best understood as a component of liberal education. Also, the purpose of general education is to advance the objectives of liberal education (Leung, 2013, p. 55).

Columbia University first began its own College Programme known as Contemporary Civilisation and Humanities (and also known as the Great Books programme). This Columbia College Programme was brought to the University of Chicago in the 1930s. It was subsequently brought to Harvard University in the 1940s. It was at Harvard that the programme was re-named General Education, and by the 1960s it was widely known in the United States by that name. In the 1980s, after a review carried out at Columbia, the programme was re-named Core Curriculum. The resulting major divergence is noteworthy. On the one hand, Core Curriculum stressed a common learning experience focussed on important concerns found in the humanities.

#### “GREATER LEARNING” AND “LESSER LEARNING”

A summary of Confucian “greater learning” is splendidly expressed in the opening lines of the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning): “The Way of greater learning lies in manifesting the original brightness of innate virtue; it lies in restoring the original brightness of that virtue in the people generally; it lies in coming to rest in the utmost goodness” (2012, 1). This statement consists of three parts: manifesting the brightness of virtue (*mingmingde* 明明德), restoring the brightness of virtue in the people (*qinmin* 親民) and coming to rest in the utmost goodness (*zhiyu zhishan* 止於至善).

The supreme good is expressed in terms of human flourishing which is composed of four parts: cultivating oneself (*xiushen* 修身), regulating the family (*qijia* 齊家), governing the state (*zhiguo* 治國) and bringing peace to the world (*pingtianxia* 平天下).

On the other hand, General Education produced a less integrated approach while emphasising an inter-disciplinary learning experience (de Bary, 2007, p. 28).

So although there clearly are several different systems of general education in the American context, two main approaches can be highlighted for the purposes of this paper. The first approach is linked to Columbia and it stresses *comprehensiveness*. The guiding principle is to ensure that all students become acquainted with some areas of knowledge which are considered of perennial value to all human beings (Cross, 1995, pp. 12-14). The second approach is linked to Harvard and it stresses *completeness*. The guiding principle is to prevent too much specialisation to the extent that students are ignorant of knowledge outside of their field of study (Li, 1999, p. 61). And now that the relationship between liberal education and general education has been dealt with, the stage is set to consider the classical Confucian accounts of education in relation to its notion of the common good.

The fundamental anthropological principle underlying Confucian educational philosophy is that all human beings are born with virtue, although this virtue is manifested differently due to their own natural endowment. Hence education is the task of refining one’s natural endowment to show forth one’s virtue clearly (*mingde* 明德). The manifestation of personal virtue allows one to lead others onto the path of character development. This education of the individual leads to the moral development of others in the domestic, political and global spheres. Therefore the three general components of the greater learning have to do with *ming* 明, *qin* 親 and *zhi* 止. The point of adult learning is to know how to attain a virtuous character. Having a virtuous character allows one to develop other people’s character. The development of other people’s character then produces the supreme or common good.

The following section of the *Daxue* describes the Confucian educational programme in some detail:

Investigate things and then knowledge is perfected. When knowledge is perfected, then intentions become *cheng* 誠. When intentions are *cheng* 誠, then the mind is rectified. Rectify the mind and the self is cultivated. Cultivate the self and the household is regulated. Only after the household is regulated is the state well ordered. Only after the state is well ordered is the world at peace (2012, 5).

Hence the goal of Confucian “greater learning” is the pursuit of the supreme or common good (*zhishan* 至善) by first becoming a virtuous person. One cultivates virtue by investigating things (*wuge* 物格), perfecting knowledge (*zhizhi* 知至), making intentions authentic (*yicheng* 意誠) and rectifying the mind (*xinzheng* 心正). The supreme good is expressed in terms of human flourishing which is composed of four parts: cultivating oneself (*xiushen* 修身), regulating the family (*qijia* 齊家), governing the state (*zhiguo* 治國) and bringing peace to the world (*pingtianxia* 平天下). Thus, the Confucian conception of the common good for all people is understood in terms of these four components of human flourishing. Also, there are eight specific components of “greater learning,” namely, investigating things, perfecting knowledge, making intentions authentic, rectifying the mind, cultivating the self, regulating the household, ordering the state and bringing peace to the world.

Accordingly, the “greater learning” first needs to be primarily focused on the virtues. Since everyone is endowed with the capacity for virtue from birth, all human beings can become virtuous by self-cultivation. Liberal education also needs to emphasise the role of the family. This is basically a formation in one’s essential relationships. One learns how to respect figures of authority in one’s parents. One also learns how to treat older and younger peers in one’s siblings. From the Confucian perspective, the good of the individual person is intimately and directly connected with the good of the family. It is part of the nature of human beings to pursue their self-

development within the family. Liberal education then needs to address the need to prepare oneself for participation in social life. Since virtue is so central to Confucianism, a good society is one that honours the virtuous and promotes them. The goal of liberal education is the attainment of global peace brought about by social harmony. Peace in the world is a necessary condition for human flourishing. This stresses the idea that the presence of violence and conflict greatly disturb human learning and virtue development. Peace in the world is also the fruit of human flourishing. This means that peace can only be sustained by educating people along the path of cultivating virtue. Hence the “greater learning” can be expressed as a liberal education programme that has the objective to reach the common good of global peace for all humanity.

Therefore, from a Confucian perspective, the concept of general education should properly be classified as a form of “lesser learning” while liberal education should really be classified as a form of “greater learning.”

Classical Confucianism conceives of the “lesser learning” in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner. The Six Arts (*liuyi* 六藝) are rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics. Rites and music teach students norms of proper behaviour and prepare them to participate in public life. Archery and charioteering are the martial arts that enable students to pick up practical skills and develop physical strength. Calligraphy and mathematics provide the avenues for students to exercise artistic expression and to develop logical thinking. Taken together the six arts form part of the essential curriculum for the “lesser learning.” The neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200 C.E.) explains how the difference between the “lesser learning” and the “greater

learning” came about in his *Daxue zhangju xu* 大學章句序 (Preface to the Commentary on the Great Learning):

At the age of eight years, from kings and dukes down to the common people, sons and younger brothers all entered on the “lesser learning” (*xiaoxue* 小學) and were instructed in sprinkling and sweeping, answering questions, the etiquette of advancing and retiring, and the accomplishments of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics. When they reached the age of 15, the Son of Heaven’s eldest son, and other sons down to the legitimate sons of dukes, ministers, great officers, and senior officials, along with outstanding sons of the people in general, all entered the “greater learning” and received instruction in the Way of thorough investigation of principle, rectifying the mind, cultivating the self, and bringing order to the people. This was how the teaching of the schools was divided into “greater” and “lesser” (2012).

At this point the programme for General Education of the University of Macau is presented as a case study. Adapted from the model of Harvard University, it is comprised of four major components: (1) Language and Communication includes the study of English and Chinese or Portuguese and writing skills. (2) Science and Information Technology includes topics like mathematics, computing, physical science and life science. (3) Society and Culture includes topics like history, Chinese civilisation, values and ethics. (4) Self-Development includes areas like physical education and visual and performing arts (General Education Programme Office, 2015, pp.6-7). It can now be seen that the spirit of the classical conception of the “lesser learning” is captured in this contemporary notion of general education. As already explained above, this refers to the curriculum common to all university students which covers multiple disciplines and is designed to promote their overall intellectual

development and prepare them for participation in social life.

Therefore, from a Confucian perspective, the concept of general education should properly be classified as a form of “lesser learning” while liberal education should really be classified as a form of “greater learning.” So general education is essentially inter-disciplinary in nature and equips students with the most essential practical knowledge for them to assume their social roles in a globalised and technological economy. Although general education is necessary but not sufficient for promoting the common good, it certainly deserves to be an integral component of university curricula. But liberal education provides students with the requisite methodology for self-directed study with a view towards life-long learning. This requires the acquisition of specific virtues to develop intellectual and moral maturity as part of self-cultivation. If tertiary education is truly to serve the common good, then the goals of liberal education surely have to be embedded in the university curricula as well. As mentioned earlier, general education should really be considered a component of liberal education. Moreover, the purpose of general education is to support the goals of liberal education. These goals begin at the individual level with self-development and ordering of one’s personal life. Subsequently this leads to the social level with attaining the common good by regulating the affairs of the family, the state and the world.

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