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# NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF HEROIC CHARACTERS IN FILM AS A PROMISING METHOD FOR MORAL EDUCATION IN CON- TEMPORARY CHINA

## 电影中英雄人物的叙事分析 作为当代中国道德教育的一种有前景的方法

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### ABSTRACT

The importance of narrative for character formation and moral development is well understood especially in the field of Christian ethics, which reflects upon the morality presented and developed in Biblical narrative. This paper will explore the potential that narrative analysis has for understanding films and their ethical significance generally, thus opening up the possibility for exploring contemporary Chinese films in particular. It will outline the theory of narrative analysis, and its applications, particularly in the field of ethics and adult moral education, highlighting the significance of empathy and its cultivation through experiential learning, thus demonstrating the potential role of visual media in exploring the basic questions of morality, both personal and social. In subsequent essays, I hope to show how narrative analysis can enhance our understanding of the traditions of Confucian ethics. The purpose of this project is to prepare responsible leaders for the complexities of the current global economy, by exploring a useful dimension for programs and seminars focused on *ethics training and adult moral education*.



## I. THE NEED FOR IMPROVED MODELS OF MORAL EDUCATION

China and the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong have initiated anti-corruption programs that target illegal and unethical practices deemed dangerous to the economic and social well-being of the nation and its people (Scott, 2017). These initial efforts at reform, however, focus mostly on governmental entities and officials, with much more to be done for ethics training and moral education among companies and in universities that educate business leaders. Because standard academic models of applied ethics neglect character education and moral development, they tend to favour compliance models that are less adept at handling the complexities of the current cross-cultural economies. Such approaches to morality also perpetuate an individualistic perspective on ethics that runs against the grain of the communitarian perspectives more consistent with the cultural traditions of east Asia and China in particular. More effective ethics education would emphasise the cultivation of moral character, for example, by reconstructing Confucian ethics and its corresponding virtues. Narrative analysis of movies, like Zhang Yimou's *Hero*—as I hope to show in subsequent essays—may open a reflective space for the renewed appreciation of Confucian ethics with its stories and dialogues about virtuous people and the moral challenges they face.

### A. The Inherent Power of Visual Narrative to Influence and to Educate

Narratives are integral to the development of humanity's thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and their corresponding behaviour (Allison & Goethals, 2016) and long-term socialisation (McQuail, 2010). From the first cave drawings through the most advanced virtual reality games, visual images have elevated storytelling

to new levels of influence. The impact of such images continues to grow because the evolving “brain is able to process visuals 60,000 times faster than text and those visuals can trigger a prevailing emotional response from the recipient” (Wakefield, 2015). Visual narratives, such as those presented in film and on television, with their combination of images, sound, and story engage the senses, emotions, and intellect (Berelson, 1959), so as to be “credited with an almost irresistible power to mould an audience's beliefs, cognition and behaviours” (McQuail, 2010).

Narrative analysis (or narratology) evaluates the communicated story or stories to gain understanding and insight into depicted events, or more specifically, it investigates the story's dimensions in order to understand the personal, social, cultural, and moral experiences as meant by the author's portrayal of them (Corvellec, 2006). Narrative analysis combines the inherent power of visual media and narrative to create an experiential learning activity that can be focused reflectively on ethics and morality.

Narrative analysis of visual media essentially serves as a simulation, which is a powerful type of experiential learning activity (Moon, 2004). Simulations are “quite literally the imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system” (Banks, et al., 2003). Simulations have been used as experiential learning for pilots, nurses, soldiers, engineers, as well as intellectually concentrated areas like finance, economics and languages, and of course in creative professions such as film and in television. Simulations have been utilised in various fields precisely because they are more effective than traditional approaches to teaching—including business ethics and morality (Smith, 2001, 2010).

Visual media thus may be considered a source of content tailored specifically for moral education and ethics training. Movies such as *The Big Short*, *Michael Clayton*, and *Supersize Me* shed light into areas of unethical business behaviour that otherwise would have remained dark and

dim. Asian films such as *After Shock* and *Tidal Wave* embody aspects of Confucian ethics (Lee, et al., 2011), while *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) conveys the Chinese government's view of its own origins (Johnson, 2016). American television shows such as *The Office* and *30 Rock* use humour to increase our moral sensitivity on matters of discrimination, workplace safety, and office politics. Narrative analysis of stories about heroic characters wrestling with ethical dilemmas thus is but one resource for teaching society about admirable virtues and moral maturity.

## B. Narrative Ethics as Transformative Moral Education

Various theories of moral development (Piaget, 1932), support the ability of ethics training and moral education to facilitate higher levels of moral maturity and of ethical behaviour in many areas, including business. Great wisdom teachers long ago recognized that certain stories (such as those involving heroes struggling with moral imperatives) had a transformative power to change our actions and behaviours by changing our thoughts and perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). Narrative analysis of such stories serves as an experiential learning activity because it makes “an excellent platform for developing techniques of [ethical] analysis and of sharpening our moral reasoning skills” (Teays, 2015, p. 1). The transformative potential of experiential character education is realised when it generates the “motivational force—the power and energy—to do good and to avoid doing bad” (Kroll & Egan, 2004, p. 357).

Narrative ethics, a sub-discipline or dimension of narrative analysis, regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling. Narrative ethics analyses the story to determine the author's ethical framework as conveyed either implicitly in the story's dynamics, or explicitly, in the exposition of the values, conflicts, and decisions of its main characters (Phelan, 2012). Narrative ethics is thus a critical component of transformative education. Confucius, for example, understood the ultimate purpose of

education as transformation of individuals, of leaders, of government and of society. “Confucian pedagogies, resources, activities, and learning environments [were and still] are customized to produce *Junzi* [noble, exemplary person] who are filled with *Ren* [empathy, benevolence] and conduct themselves in accordance with *Li* [proper behaviour towards others]” (Tan, 2009). Confucius' discussion of examples from human behaviour, heroic and otherwise, and use of poetry shows how the analysis of stories can be an experiential learning activity with transformative potential for moral development (Heffner, 2016).

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## II. EMPATHY AND THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF MORALITY

An individual's level of moral maturity—or stage of moral development—is shaped by four dimensions or aspects of morality: character, intelligence, culture, and behaviour. These dimensions can be correlated with types of ethical theory: virtue, analytic, organizational, and applied (Hayslip, et al., 2006). When properly focused on the four dimensions of morality, narrative analysis can support a transformative educational experience in moral development. The potential for personal growth or moral development is a defining quality of stage theories that apply equally to cognition, sexuality and morality, with each theory recognizing the role of education and experience in promoting that development.

While all four aspects of moral development and their corresponding ethical theories should be addressed to varying degrees in a comprehensive presentation, empathy should

be highlighted as the core value cultivated as part of moral character and virtue ethics. Empathy increases moral awareness and the moral reasoning essential to moral intelligence and analytic ethics. Empathy provides the energy and framework for moral behaviour and applied ethics (Tangney, et al., 2007). Sharpening the focus on empathy thus permits a more balanced approach to all four dimensions of moral development.

Empathy is an essential element of moral intelligence because it possesses a qualitative and affective difference that enhances moral awareness and descriptive ethics (Feshbach, 1975), which in turn improves moral intelligence and overall development (Jha, et al., 2010). Moral awareness is the ability to recognize and understand the ethical question at hand, for example, relevant social circumstances, impact on stakeholders, implications for business, industry and the public at large, which are all invaluable to achieving superior moral intelligence. In addition to producing a heightened moral awareness, empathy also helps with moral reasoning because collecting more data with more distinctions leads to better informed analysis and superior decisions (improving moral judgment and normative ethics). Moral emotions like empathy and compassion inform one's decision-making process (moral intelligence) by helping them associate positive or negative emotions with the rightness or wrongness of the behaviour and providing them with the emotional energy to act accordingly (moral behaviour).

Empathy is also helpful for strengthening the ethical aspects of organizational culture. Organizational cultures include a variety of personnel decisions (e.g., hiring and firing, motivating and compensating, evaluating and disciplining) that are managed much better by leaders with empathy. The external dimensions of organizational culture involve relationships with stakeholders, government and larger society, all of which benefit from the cultivation of empathy among the parties.

Empathy contributes to moral character

(the predisposition to behave consistently in a manner corresponding to certain traits, emotions or goals) by impacting the elements that comprise it. Empathy, therefore, is indispensable to cultivating moral character and virtue ethics, because they are dependent upon an array of emotions and virtues engendered by empathy (Singer, 2013). Empathy's importance to moral behaviour lies in its ability to create the "motivational force—the power and energy—to do good and to avoid doing bad" (Kroll, 2004, p. 357). Empathy sensitises and shapes "people's anticipatory emotional reactions" and their characteristic patterns of conduct "which have the power, energy and force to influence their choice of behaviour" (Tangney, et al., 2007).

Moral emotions, like empathy, have an advantage over moral virtues in that people are able to more easily recognize and name the emotional dynamics impacting them, even as they may have a more difficult time identifying the inner workings of virtues. Thus, as physical symptoms of moral concern, they move us toward an integration of moral intelligence with moral character. Empathy is the lynchpin that integrates the four dimensions of moral development and facilitates a synergy among them, as in a well-designed narrative (Singer, 2013).

Empathy describes quite well the Confucian concept of *Ren*, which has been understood as humaneness – the core of being human. Manifestations of that humaneness are the loving interaction between people (such as mother and infant), kindness and benevolence (which are all based on the emotions and virtues of empathy and compassion) (Xu, 2019). Within the traditions of Confucian ethics, empathy (*Ren*) occupies a unique and essential position, providing the foundation (along with *Li*) for the integration of all the virtues and relationships

that comprise a *Junzi*'s character (Ng, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Even beyond the wisdom of Confucius, empathy and its close cousin compassion have been cited as central to the human *moral* affective system (Eisenberg, et al. 2006). Conversely, the lack

closely with the heroic characters (stimulus person) creating an empathetic moral response with enough emotional energy to influence the observer's moral character, moral behaviour and overall moral development (Kroll & Egan, 2004).

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or limitation of empathy and moral awareness (called moral blindness, moral myopia, ethical insensitivity, or ethical ignorance) (Tangney, et. al., 2007), has been identified as a major cause of many problems in various organizational settings.

### III. EMPATHY'S IMPACT UPON MORAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The power of narrative to influence moral development resides in its ability to impact the cognitive, psychological, and emotional dimensions of the human person (Bennis, 1996). Heroic characters serve as the primary source of that influence because of their ability to engage our feelings and thoughts at very deep and fundamental levels. This approach has a legitimate pedigree as Piaget, Kohlberg and others utilised "a storytelling technique to tell people stories involving moral dilemmas" in refining their positions on moral development. Narrative analysis thus enables the observer to identify

Narrative analysis of heroic characters in visual media nurtures empathy by helping people to recognize, name and associate specific emotions with virtuous behaviour they want to emulate and with unfavourable behaviour they want to avoid. Moral emotions are both "negatively valenced 'self-conscious' emotions—such as shame (anger), guilt (related to empathy), and embarrassment [fear]" and/or "positively valenced moral emotions—elevation, [approval], satisfaction, gratitude," and sometimes pride (Frijda, 1986, p. 207). Elevation "motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves" (Haidt, et al., 2002, p. 276). Conversely, shame, guilt, and regret are negatively valenced and serve a similar function of deterrence (Tangney, et. al., 2007).

Elevation is the positive moral emotion elicited when observing others behaving in a particularly virtuous, commendable, or superhuman way (Kroll & Egan, 2004). "Most importantly, the feeling of elevation has a concomitant behavioural component: A desire to become a better person" (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Narrative analysis of heroic characters promotes the empathy needed to experience the positive moral emotion of elevation, which in turn has the potential to energize one to act in a similar, analogous (Haidt, et al., 2002), or generally virtuous manner.

Heroic characters and their stories act as "highly effective delivery systems for imparting complex truths and for elevating humans toward a

<sup>1</sup> Confucius describes a *Junzi* as a combination of various virtues [which correspond to certain dimensions of morality]:

- 1) *Ren* (benevolence, empathy), [moral character and moral behaviour]
- 2) *Li* (social propriety, harmony, proper behaviour towards others), [moral behaviour, culture]
- 3) *Yi* (righteousness, justice, moral disposition to do what is right), [moral character]
- 4) *Zhi* (wisdom, knowledge about what is right and wrong) [moral intelligence]
- 5) *Shu* (altruism and reciprocity found in the Golden Rule) [moral culture and behaviour]
- 6) *Wen* (desire for peace, respect for arts) [moral culture]
- 7) *Xiao* (fundamental relationships rooted in respect, loyalty and even love) [moral culture]
- 8) *Xin* (loyalty and integrity) (Ng, 2009).



higher emotional and behavioural state” (Allison & Goethals, 2016). “Stories of heroic action impart wisdom by supplying mental models, or scripts, for how one could, or should, lead one’s life” (Allison & Goethals, 2016). These stories communicate fundamental truths about suffering, meaning, love, mystery, divinity, death and morality (what is right and wrong, good and evil), and other “transrational phenomena”—important truths of life that defy understanding by traditional tools of rational analysis (Rohr, 2011). Heroes and their stories also transcend cultural boundaries (and their ethical complexities) because they capture and communicate universal human virtues and values, emotions and traits. Heroic characters and their stories simultaneously reflect and shape the values and virtues of society and culture (Bruner, 1990).

Heroes in movies are emotionally accessible to the audience, facilitating identification and moral emotions that assist overall development by their influence upon both affect and cognition. Heroes also exemplify universal virtues and values that transcend the problems of cultural contradictions. The hero’s story seems to be custom made for a narrative analysis designed to assist moral development, because a common characteristic of such accounts is that the hero’s journey is one of transformation laced with moral meaning (Voytilla, 1999). The primary expression of the narrative’s moral message and its view of moral development is portrayed in the heroic character’s thoughts, perspectives, reasoning, and behaviours (Teays, 2015).

The hero’s journey eventually leads to a moral choice that brings him face to face with his moral myopia, moral misjudgement, and overall moral weakness (Voytilla, 1999). There is always something—disordered desires or passions or values—that complicates the decision-making process and the ability to do what is right. But during such moral conflict, a hero’s moral sensitivity increases, moral reasoning and judgment evolve, and most especially his moral strength and character develop. Heroes finally

reveal their higher level of moral development when they resolve a moral dilemma with admirable moral behaviour and revelatory moral character. Even tragic characters that succumb to undesirable behaviour offer a lesson in morality. Narrative analysis of heroic stories enables the reader vicariously to accompany heroes in their experiences, their learning, and in their ultimate moral transformation (Smith, 2010).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Narrative analysis of visual media is a helpful approach to moral education and ethics training because not only can it be tailored to address the different dimensions of morality but also it is inherently more effective at engaging, educating, influencing and preparing leaders who will guide China, as well as the rest of the world, through the complexities of our growing interdependence. As I hope to show in forthcoming works, narrative analysis of heroic characters in Chinese films, like Zhang Yimou’s memorable *Hero*, is an especially effective learning activity because it can challenge us to cultivate virtuous traits and moral emotions like empathy, which are essential to all dimensions of moral development, and can engender a transformative educational experience in moral development – nurturing a truly moral person idealised, for example, in Confucian morality as the *Junzi*.



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