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THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF “LEARNING-ORIENTED TEACHING” IN THE ANALECTS AND ITS INSIGHTS FOR CONTEMPORARY TIMES¹

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Abstract: In the study of ancient Chinese educational philosophy, some scholars believe that the main reason why traditional Chinese educational philosophy attaches importance to teaching rather than learning lies in Confucianism. This statement is unacceptable. If we take a careful and further study of the educational philosophy and practices of Confucianism, especially Confucius, the master of Confucianism, we will come to an opposite conclusion that Confucius attaches great importance to learning. It can be said that the characteristic of Confucius’s educational philosophy theory is “learning-oriented teaching”. This paper explores the manifestation of Confucius’s philosophy of both learning and teaching in *the Analects*, the reasons for its formation and its contemporary significance.


Keywords: *The Analects of Confucius*. Learning-oriented teaching. Learning theory. Enlightenment to contemporary education.

INTRODUCTION

According to the description in *The Analects of Confucius*, it can be clearly seen that one of the distinctive characteristics of Confucius’s philosophy

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of education is “learning-oriented teaching”. “Learning-oriented teaching” is a kind of new teaching idea with ancient roots, which focuses on “teaching through learning” and emphasizes student initiatives in the learning process. Confucius divided the learning process into three interrelated development stages: learning, thinking and acting (HAN, 1985). He raised the issue of inspiring thinking and guided students to stimulate their own exploration of learning and promoted the students’ independence and cooperation ability. Instead of being the directors of the class, teachers should be the creators of the learning situations, organizers, participants, and facilitators of students’ learning activities. In cultural cultivation, teachers should become mentors and role models for students in learning, thinking, personality, etc. in order to achieve teaching goals (YE, 1991). The idea of “learning-oriented teaching” has been embodied in *The Analects of Confucius* over 2000 years ago. In dealing with the relationship between “teaching” and “learning” in the teaching process, Confucius paid special attention to “learning”. He took learning as the premise and basic condition of teaching and discussed teaching by the principle of learning through his own learning experiences and by his students’ learning conditions and psychological characteristics.

1 HOW DID CONFUCIUS ATTACH GREAT IMPORTANCE TO LEARNING IN TEACHING?

Among the 20 chapters of *The Analects of Confucius*, the first chapter is about learning. In a collection of speeches containing philosophy, politics, ethics, morality, and education etc., as soon as he began to talk, he mentioned learning first. Confucius remarked, “It is indeed a pleasure to acquire knowledge and, as you go on acquiring, to put into practice what you have acquired.” (GU, 2013, p. 1). He even believed that studying is more important than eating or sleeping. On one occasion, Confucius remarked, “I have spent a whole day without eating and a whole night without sleep. Instead, I was thinking. It was of no use. I found it better to acquire knowledge from books.” (GU, 2013, p. 377). Why did Confucius emphasize learning to such an extent? According to the understanding of Confucius, the significance of learning is divided into several levels. For him, “I am not one born with understanding. I am one who has given himself to the study of Antiquity and is diligent in seeking for understanding in such studies.” (GU, 2013, p. 142). So, he attached great importance to “learning”. He often said that “In education, always study as if you have not yet reached your goal and as though you’re worried about losing

it.” (GU, 2013, p. 171). For students and ordinary people, if they don’t study, they will have “six failures”, that is,

First there is the mere love of morality: that alone, without culture, degenerates into fatuity. Second, there is the mere love of knowledge: that alone, without culture, tends to dilettantism. Third, there is the mere love of honesty: that alone, without culture, produces heartlessness. Fourth, there is the mere love of uprightness: that alone, without culture, leads to tyranny. Fifth, there is the mere love of courage: that alone, without culture, produces recklessness. Sixth, there is the mere love of strength of character: that alone, without culture, produces eccentricity. (GU, 2013, p. 422).

That is to say, if one doesn’t study, he will be ignorant, uninhibited, self-hurting, sharp, disorderly and arrogant. Study can eliminate these shortcomings. For teachers who teach other people, learning is the premise of teaching. Learning ability is the qualification of being a teacher. Confucius remarked, “If a man will constantly go over what he has acquired and keep continually adding new acquisitions to it, he may become a teacher of men.” (GU, 2013, p. 28). He used to ask himself, “To meditate in silence; patiently to acquire knowledge; and to be indefatigable in teaching it to others, which one of these things can I say that I have done?” (GU, 2013, p. 129). Learning from reviewing and learning without tiredness mentioned here is the process of learning. It is the precondition of being a teacher and teaching tirelessly. If teachers do not attach importance to learning and take learning as the premise, they will lose the qualification of being teachers and, of course, they will not be qualified to teach their students. This is in line with Marx’s thought of “Educators must be educated first” (YANG, 2014).

Just because Confucius attached great importance to learning, he summarized a complete and systematic learning theory in his long-term teaching practice. In addition to the above-mentioned profound insights on the significance of learning, he also established a systematic learning process combined with “[...] listening, thinking, exercising and practicing”, advocating the rigorous style of study — “He was free from self-interest, from prepossessions, bigotry and egoism.” (GU, 2013, p. 179). He emphasized the correct attitude towards learning— “being honest”, “being modest” and “being persistent”. He put forward the learning ideas and methods of “erudite knowledge and inquiry”, the “combination of learning and thinking” and “combination of old and new knowledge” etc. And they all have incisive views

and profound insights. It is no exaggeration to say that if Confucius's discussion on learning in *the Analects* is systematically summarized and explained, it is the earliest "learning" theory in China.

2 THE MANIFESTATION OF CONFUCIUS'S TEACHING THOUGHT IN THE *ANALECTS*

Confucius emphasized learning, but also teaching. The characteristics of his teaching and discussions on teaching lie in that, teaching starts from learning and bases itself on learning. Teaching is carried out in learning and integrated with the learning process. In short, it is "learning-oriented teaching", which is fully expressed in *the Analects*.

First, whenever Confucius mentioned "teaching" and "instruction", he equated them with "learning" and regarded "learning" as the premise and condition of "teaching" and "instruction". This thought of Confucius was inherited and developed into the teaching principle of "Teaching and learning benefit each other", that is, "One discovers his ignorance only through learning. Learning is followed by knowing the deficiency while teaching is followed by knowing the difficulty. Then one can reflect and then can make self-improvement. So "teaching is half learning and learning is half teaching." (GU, 2013, p. 403). This argument tells people incisively and clearly that teaching and learning are two aspects of the same thing. As far as its importance is concerned, teaching and learning are equally divided, and neither can be missing. Teachers' teaching promotes students' learning, at the same time, students' improved learning promotes teachers' teaching further. Such continuous mutual promotion and development have profoundly revealed the dialectical relationship between teaching and learning (CHEN, 2014).

Secondly, Confucius's teaching theories were mainly based on how he learned to teach his own students, which can be called teaching by learning. In *the Analects*, there are records of how Confucius taught his disciples. For example, Confucius often exchanged ideas with his students by defining what kind of person "he" was, "his" feelings towards learning, "his" attitude to learning, "his" experiences of the moral cultivation, "his" way of lifelong study and the goal he pursued in his life, "his" understanding of benevolence, etiquette, filial piety, learning, etc. From talking about their own learning experiences and self-cultivation, he permeated into the teaching of his disciples, which can be called "speech" teaching. At the same time, Confucius

also attached great importance to "body" teaching. The so-called "body" teaching is to lead by example, always pay attention to use one's own example and personality to influence students, so as to achieve a subtle teaching effect. He said, "If a man is orderly in his personal conduct, he is served without difficulty in giving orders. But if a man is not orderly in his personal conduct, he may give orders, but his orders will not be obeyed." (GU, 2013, p. 296). Based on this understanding, Confucius attached great importance to his role model in teaching. He put forward the requirements of "being eager to learn" and "being happy to learn" to the students. He himself was a learning model who was never tired of learning, worked hard and forgot his own worries. He wanted his students to "hear more", "see more", "know more" and to be "well-informed". He himself was an aggressive, versatile, and knowledgeable master. He required his students to have the virtue of honesty and modesty of "knowing is knowing, not knowing is not knowing" and he himself was an honest and humble man who admitted his "ignorance", preferred "asking questions and learning from his subordinates". He hoped that students would not be afraid to correct their mistakes and when he made mistakes, he would be as honest and willing to correct his mistakes as if he had been lucky enough to change. In a word, Confucius, with his lofty personality, made himself a personal example as an effective means of combining "teaching" and "learning" closely by practicing and matching his words with his teaching. Confucius was a sincere teacher, and his students naturally held profound feelings towards him.

Thirdly, Confucius attached great importance to students' learning psychology. Teaching according to students' psychological state is the outstanding embodiment of Confucius's thought of learning and teaching. From his own personal experiences in learning, Confucius realized that the depth and breadth of a person's acquisition of knowledge depends on his subjective psychological state of learning. Learning is a kind of hard mental work. But Confucius taught students to take learning as a joyful thing and get fun from it. He said, "When it comes to learning, those who know it are not as those who love it; those who love it are not as those who find their joy in it." (GU, 2013, p. 118). And he praised Yen Hui, one of his favourite disciples, saying that, "So much heroism is in that man! Living on one meal a day, water and living in the lowest hovels of the city, — no man could have stood such hardships, yet he — he did not lose his cheerfulness. How much heroism is in that man!" (GU, 2013, p. 112). Confucius attached great importance to students' psychological state of learning and the initiatives of

students' learning, which showed that he had a profound understanding of the law of learning. In teaching, in order to mobilize students' initiatives to learn and enjoy learning itself, he initiated the famous teaching principle of inspiration. He said,

In my method of teaching, I always wait for my student to make an effort to find his way through a difficulty before I show him the way. I also make him find his own illustrations before I give him one of my own. When I have pointed the bearing of a subject in one direction and found that my student cannot himself see his bearings into other directions, I do not then repeat my lesson (GU, 2013, p. 132).

Zhu Xi explained it by saying, "Don't rush to enlighten a man until he wants to understand but failed. Don't rush to instruct a man until he wants to speak out but can't. Only when the students are in the positive thinking state can the teachers timely induce and trigger them." (Chapter 7 of *The Analects of Confucius*). (GU, 2013, p. 133). That is to say, the "inspiration" of teachers' teaching must be based on the psychological state of students' learning and the "enlightenment" must be based on the "circumstances" and cannot be forced into learners. "If you teach him the East, but he can't infer the West, the South and the North from it, then you don't have to teach him anymore." (YE, 1991, p. 86). This shows clearly to what extent teachers enlighten the students and how much knowledge students should be given. Learning cannot be determined by teachers' subjective wishes, but by students' psychological state of learning and practical needs (ZHANG, 2003). In order to inspire students' initiatives and enthusiasm, Confucius often applied Question & Answer Method for teaching. He put forward various questions to students and encouraged them to think and ask more questions. Sometimes he praised the students for asking good questions, such as "perfect", "good questions" and so on. Sometimes, in order to inspire students' interest in learning, students' existing knowledge and intuitive things around them are often used to illustrate abstract concepts and principles. For example, "running water" is used to interpret the endless phenomenon of all things, "pine" is compared to one's moral integrity, "North Star" implies the virtue of politics, "the wind on the grass" is compared to the virtue of a gentleman, "Yoke of a cart and trolley" is compared to one's faith. His inspiring teaching was so fascinating that questioners "did their best" and the students felt "I can't stop learning". All of these highlight the characteristics of his teaching thought of learning and teaching.

Fourth, Confucius’s teaching students according to their aptitude is equal to the concept of “learning-oriented teaching”. In *The Analects of Confucius*, there is a record like this:

A disciple, the intrepid Chung Yu, asked if he might at once carry out any truth which he had learnt into practice. “No”, Confucius answered, “You have the wishes of your parents and your old people to consult. How can you take upon yourself to carry at once into practice what you have learnt?” Another disciple on another occasion asked the same question. “Yes”, replied Confucius, “Carry it at once.” Later, another disciple took the liberty to ask Confucius why he gave two completely different answers to the same question. “That is because”, answered Confucius, “One man is too diffident, I therefore said that to encourage him. The other man, while, is too forward, therefore I said that to pull him back.” (GU, 2013, p. 244).

This story shows that Confucius’ answers to the same question are quite different because of students’ different personalities. Teachers should focus on the differences and adopt different educational methods to promote each student’s development. According to this model, Zhu Xi said, “Confucius teaches people according to their different talents.” (LI, 1990, p. 201). This is where the term “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” comes from. In fact, it is more precise in “learning-oriented teaching” process (DAI, 2013). Confucius made it clear that “Men, in their nature are alike, but by practice they become widely different (Yanghuo).” That is to say, people’s temperaments are similar by nature. Due to different day-to-day “practice” (GU, 2013, p. 415), however, the qualities of each learner such as their character, virtue, ambition, interest and ability are quite different from each other. Therefore, teaching should be based on the fact that the students are quite different in many aspects. He put it clearly that, “You may speak of high things to those who in natural qualities of mind are above average men. You may not speak to those who in natural qualities of mind are below average men.” (GU, 2013, p. 118). The key to the success of “learning-oriented teaching” is to be familiar with the different situations of students’ learning. Therefore, Confucius took great pains to understand and study his students. “You look at how a man acts, consider his motives, and find out his taste. How can a man hide himself, how can he hide himself from you?” (GU, 2013, p. 28). He had a very specific and profound understanding of his students’ cultivation, interests, hobbies, specialties and knowledge levels through “observing their behavior, motivations and means to achieve their goals”. And he even knew what kind of work was suitable for each of his students in the future.

Therefore, when his students asked about benevolence, teaching, politics and learning etc., Confucius' answers were not always the same. Teaching should be carried out in a targeted way just like applying medicine according to the patient's indications or shooting the arrow at the target. Obviously, the essence of teaching lies in the fact that teaching should be based on the characteristics of students, students' learning objects, process and the learning environment (BRUCE, 2009), which is well reflected in Confucius' teaching thought of "learning-oriented teaching".

To sum up, the characteristics of Confucius' teaching theory of "learning-oriented teaching" are obvious. With the theory and practice of combining teaching with learning, Confucius correctly solved the relationship between teaching and learning in the teaching process and revealed the objective law of teaching process. Therefore, his teaching was very successful. In practice, he had "taught many talented students".

3 THE REASONS FOR ITS FORMATION

The formation of Confucius's teaching thought regarding learning and teaching is by no means accidental. There are at least three reasons for this. First, from the characteristics of the private schools founded by Confucius, they can be regarded as talent training institutions of Confucian political schools in nature. The purpose of it is to train the talents who run the country to carry out the Confucian "benevolent governance". The teaching objects are adults. The content of teaching is "four kinds of education: literature, practice, loyalty and faith". The organizational form is individual teaching. Based on the characteristics of these schools, in order to solve the relationship between teaching and learning in the process of teaching, Confucius's teaching thought naturally highlights learning and he attaches more importance to learning. This is the objective condition for the formation of Confucius's thought of learning and teaching.

Second, from Confucius's subjective cognition, the materialistic epistemology of "Men are close in nature, but far apart in habit" can be considered to be the epistemological and theoretical basis of his study. Admittedly, there are some descriptions of idealistic Transcendentalism in *the Analects*, such as Confucius's belief in the "heaven" of "being born to know" and "not being able to know" and so on. However, from the perspective of Confucius's teaching methods, his teaching practice is a complete negation of

his point of view with little idealism (ZHOU, 2000). He never promised to say that he was the genius who was born to know, but he repeatedly stated that he was not a “Genius” but a diligent “learned” person. It is from his view of “close in nature, but far in learning” that we regard “Knowing you know nothing is the beginning of wisdom” as a principle of self-discipline and confirm that “learning, thinking, practicing and reflecting” are basically in line with people’s cognitive process. He puts forward many insights about the process of cognition, such as “Knowing more and seeing more”, “Thinking more deeply”, “Combining learning with thinking”, “Reviewing the past and learning the new”. It is from this point of view that many of his teaching principles and methods are in accordance with the law of teaching. If Confucius takes the idealistic Transcendentalism of “born to know” as the ideological basis, it is inconceivable that his teachings and methods can accomplish the remarkable achievements that they have, and his philosophy of teaching has been emitting brilliantly for more than 2000 years.

Third, real knowledge comes from practice. It can be seen in *The Analects of Confucius* that there were both idealistic Transcendentalism and materialistic epistemological tendencies in his philosophy (LI, 1990). Then why did Confucius take the materialistic epistemology as the basis of teaching, thus forming the characteristics of his teaching thought of learning and teaching? This is due to Confucius’s long-term teaching practice. Chairman Mao said, “True knowledge comes from practice (from *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume V, P291).” (MAO, 1977, p. 291). Confucius began his education career at the age of about 30. He has taught for 40 years. His teaching theory is deeply rooted in the fertile soil of practice. In addition, he took the teaching practice seriously all his life with an attitude of modesty, diligence and faithfulness, constantly revising and abandoning his idealistic views so that his understanding and theory were constantly closer to the truth and finally he summarized many valuable ideological heritages in line with the principles of teaching.

4 ITS ENLIGHTENING INSIGHTS FOR CONTEMPORARY TEACHING

Confucius’s educational philosophy of “learning-oriented teaching” has universal significance. For our teaching today, there are at least the following enlightening insights and significance. Firstly, in the teaching process, teachers must overcome the tendency of emphasizing teaching rather than

learning. Teachers should change their teaching concepts and establish the idea of “learning-oriented teaching” and “teaching by learning” (LUO, 2016). Secondly, the reform of teaching methods should start from the reality of “learning” and explore while “learning”, reflecting on the teaching objectives of “learning for application”. Third, according to the needs of “learning”, a new teaching model can be designed, that is, “promoting teaching by Learning — Collaborate Study—Process Feedback—Self-evaluation” teaching model (DAI, 2013). Especially in the current implementation of online education, we should establish the teaching concepts of “student-oriented” and “learning-driven teaching”, understand the interaction relationship between the elements in the process of education, optimize and combine various teaching strategies so that the online classroom can really become an efficient platform to stimulate students’ self-development.

Note: In this paper all quotes from the *Analects* are from Gu Hongming’s translation, *Analects of Confucius*. Zhong Hua Book Company, 2008.

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Resumo: No estudo da filosofia educacional chinesa antiga, alguns estudiosos consideram que a principal razão pela qual a filosofia tradicional chinesa da educação atribui importância ao ensino e não ao aprendizado é devido ao confucionismo. Essa afirmação não é aceitável. Se fizermos um estudo cuidadoso e mais aprofundado da filosofia educacional e das práticas do confucionismo, especialmente Confúcio, o mestre do confucionismo, chegaremos a uma conclusão oposta de que Confúcio atribui grande importância ao aprendizado. Pode-se dizer que a característica da teoria da filosofia educacional de Confúcio é o “ensino orientado para a aprendizagem”. Este artigo pesquisa a manifestação da filosofia de aprender e ensinar de Confúcio, nos *Analectos*, as razões de sua formação e seu significado contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: *Analectos* de Confúcio. “Ensino orientado para a aprendizagem”. Teoria da aprendizagem. Iluminismo para a educação contemporânea.

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