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Confucian Perspectives on Learning and Self-Transformation

International and Cross-Disciplinary
Approaches

Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education

Volume 14

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Roland Reichenbach • Duck-Joo Kwak
Editors

Confucian Perspectives on Learning and Self-Transformation

International and Cross-Disciplinary
Approaches

 Springer

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Introductory Remarks

The cultural traditions of East Asian – most importantly Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism – are not well known among Western philosophers of education. The key notions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy directly concern ideals, processes, and challenges of learning, education, and self-transformation. This very elaborated and differentiated cultural context offers great opportunities for today's understanding of personal and institutional education in a global context.

The issue gathers perspectives from educational philosophers and East Asian specialists from China, Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, the USA, and Vietnam and offers a manifold discussion on educational practice and culture in the East Asian world and its relevance to other regions in the world. The contributions enrich the vocabularies in educational discourse, which have been “West-centered” for a long time, by providing alternative resources and perspectives in educational thinking, offering opportunities for the due recognition of educational thought across a global world.

The retrieval and re-examination of a long-standing tradition of humanism in East Asia, such as Confucianism, does not mean to set East Asian philosophy of education against its Western equivalence. The book rather invites to an intercultural conversation by reflecting modern sensibility and creating a common space for critical philosophical reflection on educational thought and practice.

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Chapter 1

The Confucian Ethos of Learning: An Introduction



Roland Reichenbach and Duck-Joo Kwak

To give a short introduction to the huge body of Confucian thought on learning and education is a very challenging endeavour. In what follows, we will start with some comments on a core idea of Confucian philosophy of education, the pleasure of learning. Second, we will confront some of the various stereotypes and prejudices that Confucianism is exposed to, especially in Western discourses of education. We then, thirdly, will make some remarks on the person of Confucius, and the notions of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. The fourth and fifth parts of this introduction are dedicated to the key educational concepts of the book, learning and self-transformation (or self-cultivation) from a Confucian perspective, yet to some degree with western comparative eyes, since it is our goal to point out the similarities and differences between different cultures of educational thoughts and philosophies, which tend to be often and too quickly pressed into an unfavourable and simplistic East-West-scheme. The sixth and last parts offer an overview of the nine chapters gathered in this book that have been written by East Asian and European authors from seven different countries.

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1.1 The Pleasure of Learning

Learning, self-cultivation and self-transformation are at the center of Confucian concern and reflection. The *Analects*¹ – attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC) and sometimes regarded as the most important collection of Confucian sayings and ideas – start with a statement on the *pleasure of learning*, a topos of Confucian philosophy: “The Master said, ‘Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?’” (Confucius 1979, p. 59/*Analects* I, 1). Today’s pupils and students may not or only seldom share this pleasure. Indeed, what is so pleasurable about being at the school for many years, sitting in the classroom confronted with topics which are neither easy to learn nor promising to be of any use for one’s personal life? It seems obvious that the *Analects* do not refer to *institutionalized* learning and education, which are familiar to us today in the most parts of the world. Many classical texts of Confucian philosophy on learning and education are *not* about institutional schooling nor about school curriculum or efficient teaching methods in the classroom; they are rather about the attitude of the individual learner and the process of becoming a mature person.

It may be important to keep this fact in mind when people talk of “Confucian learning culture” or try to explain the high performances of East Asian pupils in high stake international achievement tests. Do East Asian students achieve good results in their scholarly accomplishments because they entertain the Confucian pleasure of learning? That would be great, of course, but it is not likely. Linking descriptive and empirical facts of today’s educational world to what was said and written 1000 or 2500 years ago is quite a carefree way to look for an explanation. The Western stereotype of East Asian learners may include features such as eagerness to learn, adaptability, obedience, self-criticism and self-control. But then, where is the pleasure, after all? Or does having such virtues all together automatically bring about a real pleasure of learning? On the other hand, Western learners may be stereotyped as being critical, self-expressive, most often lazy, selfish and, maybe, self-authentic. And once again, where is the pleasure of learning coming from in taking such an attitude, if there is a truth at all in the words of the text? If East Asian students were still under the influence of the thoughts of Confucius, are Western students so of the writings of Plato or Aristotle? Or of Humboldt in the German speaking world, at least? Hardly!

Philosophical and educational *ideas* are not valid in describing educational reality and limited in explaining the findings in educational reality in everyday language, the word *idea* is used in the sense of “thought”, “image”, “representation”, “type” or “kind”², whereas historically *idée* is a translation of a Greek word the root meaning of which is “to see” (or “having seen”), also referring to the recognition of forms or shapes (Urmson 1967, S. 118). In Plato’s work, ideas of forms are always mentioned as: “(1) the objects of intelligence, in contrast to the objects of

¹ The collection was most probably compiled and written in the Warring States period (475–221 BC) and considered to be one of the central Confucian texts by the end of Han dynasty (206 BA–220 AD).

perception; (2) things which truly *are*, in contrast to changing objects, which are in a state of *becoming*; (3) eternal, in contrast to the perishable world of change” (ibid.). When we try to discuss and understand Confucian ideas on learning and self-transformation in their integrity it would be useful to take a Platonic perspective: *ideas as ideals*. Eva Illouz proposed three characteristics for what she calls “successful ideas”: (1) they must fit to the social reality, that is to say, they must be able to sufficiently help social actors to understand their life-experiences; (2) they must be able to give (ethical/practical) orientations, especially in domains of life which are regarded to be significant; and (3) they must circulate in social networks and become institutionalized to some degree (Illouz 2008, p. 41). The factual power of educational ideas may rest on these characteristics as well. It seems obvious to us that Confucian educational thoughts have such a power at their disposal, although there is a strong tendency of competing ideas emerging in today’s world of education in East Asia which is most successful and has a great impact on its educational reality, such as the shift towards competencies and standardization of curricula.

The *pleasure of learning* can be regarded as a virtue in Confucian thinking; such pleasure cannot be institutionalized and cannot be produced by means of smart pedagogical techniques. The pleasure of learning may be learned, but can it be taught?² In the critical periods of his life, Confucius practiced as a free teacher, as we know, a “Master” who would accept particular individuals as his disciples. To be a “disciple” was never a personal right, but rather an honour (cf. Steiner 2005). The features of the master-and-disciples relationship in ancient times have almost nothing to do with our understanding of the teacher-and-students relationships in the modern, institutionalized education system. Additionally, it does not seem politically correct nowadays to use the rhetoric of “mastery”, for it sounds in egalitarian. It is nevertheless interesting to note that Confucius, as far as we know, did accept *anyone* as his disciple in principle, regardless of his social class and background: “The Master said, ‘I have never denied instruction to anyone who of his own, has given me so much as a bundle of dried meat as a present’” (Confucius 1979, p. 86/ Analects VII, 7). But this does not mean that *everybody* had a *right* to be taught by the Master. On the contrary, the potential disciple or learner had to fulfill some pre-conditions the most important of which was the eagerness for and the love of learning: “I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not get into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words”, and “When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time” (Confucius 1979, p. 86/Analects VII, 7). The whole educational philosophy from the Confucian perspective is about the learning process and the person of the learner. Confucian says: “In learning the focus is on the learner; in studying the focus is on the subject. In learning something new, a man³ improves himself” (Lau 1979, p. 44).

²In the *Analects*, the expression “learning” is frequently used, the term “teaching” only very few times only (Lai 2016, p. 89).

³In classical texts only the masculine (pronoun) is used, representing men-dominated world and world views. Wherever it may be suitable, we will use the feminine (pronoun) as well.

It is important to understand that in the Confucian view the learner's self is not socially isolated and that learning processes are not independent from the social situation. The master says: "If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. On the other hand, if one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril" (Confucius 1979, p. 65/*Analects* II, 15). This means that in studying the world and one's own self the learner improves his or her personality and strengthens his or her personhood. In opposition to the quasi-romantic idea that a "true" interest in studying the world should always be *intrinsically* motivated, the learning process can be changing in quality and motivation; it may be initiated by a problematic situation, extrinsically and involuntary. In this respect, the crucial idea of the learning process from the Confucian perspective can be observed from the conception of three stages or levels of learning and education: "The Master said, 'To be fond of something is better than merely to know it, and to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it'" (Confucius 1979, p. 84/*Analects* VI, 20). We can interpret this as follows: *Knowing* as acquiring knowledge and skills is the precondition of being able to *appreciate* what one has learned (and being fond of), and *loving* what one is learning and/or has learnt is the precondition to be able to *enjoy* oneself with the skills and knowledge one has acquired. One might state, therefore, that enjoying is better than loving, and loving is better than knowing; but this indicates that there is no joy without knowing and appreciation. This Confucian idea is unique and inspiring especially for today's educational culture in which we tend to think the other way around; knowing is to come after loving and understanding. Here we might have a better sense of what the Confucian idea of "pleasure of learning" – called *haoxue* (學) – is all about.⁴

1.2 Stereotypes and Prejudices

The "Confucian self" is not vanishing or drowning in society and its social order, as an old and persistent cliché and stereotype is suggesting. It is also not going ahead; it is not preceding with social order as it is seen in the fiction of philosophical liberalism (cf. Roetz 2006, p. 79). The relationship between society and the (moral) self is rather to be understood in a dialectical manner. On the one hand, it is "undeniable that Confucius advocated a strong paternalism in government and this remained unchanged as a basic principle throughout the whole history of Confucianism" (Lau 1979, p. 36f.). On the other hand, the Confucian self is neither an isolated atom nor just a small wheel in the giant machine of society but, rather, a social entity based on moral autonomy and self-examination: "The gentleman is no vessel" (Confucius 1979, p. 64/*Analects* II, 12) – meaning that "he is no specialist, as every vessel is

⁴To put it with Chen Lai: "Persons are considered to have a love of learning when they are not concerned about material enjoyment but instead pursue spiritual fulfilment and excellence of character; when they are cautious yet earnest, and when they want to learn from those who know the way" (Lai 2016, p. 84).

designed for a specific purpose only” (ibid., footnote). The educated person⁵ has achieved an attitude of solidarity but, in principle, remains for his or her own: “The gentleman enters into associations but not cliques; the small man enters into cliques but not associations” (Confucius 1979, p. 65/*Analects* II, 12). This attitude of the wise or educated person may be compared today with the ideal of a ‘post-communitarian solidarity’. Self respect, moral strengthening, and examination of the self are three core educational aspects of Confucian thought. The central motive of *The Analects* (*Lunyu*) is the return to public decency and morality after (hard work of) contemplation of oneself, the sincere search of one’s soul (or heart-mind). This motive is especially pushed forward by Mencius (372–289 BC): “The Way of learning is nothing other than this: searching for the heart-mind that’s wandered away” (Mencius 1998, P. 207/*Mencius* VI, 11), and almost two millennia later by Wang Yangming (1472–1529), most prominent representative of the idealistic wing of Neo-Confucianism.

Confucius can be perceived as a major founder, representative and proponent of secular morality and ethics. Religious topics and questions are encountered with reservation and epistemic modesty, reminding of rather an agnostic than skeptical attitude: “To say to know when you know and to say you don’t know when you do not, that is knowledge” (Confucius 1979, p. 65/*Analects* II, 18). Confucius is neither a preacher nor does he declare his religious beliefs. As Tzu-kung said: “One can get to hear about the Master’s accomplishments, but one cannot get to hear his views on human nature and the Way of Heaven” (Confucius 1979, p. 78/*Analects* V, 13). Wisdom is to “work for the things the common people have a right to and to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence ...” (ibid., p. 84; VI, 22). This particular attitude of Confucius, distant reflection and respect, was much appreciated by early philosophers of European Enlightenment because it supported their view of a “natural” morality without ecclesiastical lecture. Confucius’ *Analects* (*Lunyu*) were translated into Latin towards the end of the seventeenth century.⁶ As Heiner Roetz pointed out, the Confucian ethics reminds of the capacity to produce judgments at a *post-conventional* level (Roetz 2006, p. 90) in the sense of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981). The educated gentleman or person, one may say, nevertheless belongs to the world as everyone else does, and has to follow societal conventions as all other human beings do; but in contrast to the ‘uneducated’ or poorly educated person, he or she is able to look at the world and himself or herself from a post-conventional perspective, without preventing himself or herself from following the rules of social order. Therefore, to view the core of Confucian ethics in the mere adaptation to societal conventions, as, for instance, Max Weber did in his sociology of religion (Weber 1993/1920), is not just problematic, but simply wrong. This philosophical prejudice has a long-standing history from the

⁵Confucius invokes the term «an exemplary person» with the term ‘educated man’ (cf. Lai 2016, p. 88).

⁶The ideas of Confucius became known in Europe in the sixteenth century by reports of missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610); in 1687 Father Prospero Intorcetta (1626–1696) translated the writings of Confucius into Latin.

beginning in the European, especially German Enlightenment. The unity of nature and reason was, as Roetz (2006, p. 109) explains, the backbone of early enthusiasm for Chinese philosophy in the eighteenth century, as expressed by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), for instance. Confucian and Neo-Confucian writings were perceived as welcoming examples of panmoralism and holistic world-views which European philosophers of Enlightenment appreciated and interpreted through the lenses of Renaissance philosophy and the ancient Stoa. The holistic world-view was then radically put into question or even destroyed by the critiques of Immanuel Kant, and shortly after by Hegel's dialectic philosophy. The interest in Chinese Philosophy, especially Confucianism, diminished rapidly after this rationalistic turn. Confucius was then primarily regarded as a prototype of *conventional* morality (in the sense of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* or substantial morality) whereas a more abstract and analytical view of *formal* morality started its triumphal march. In one or another way, philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Herder, Montesquieu and Nietzsche convicted Confucianism as a sort of dried up philosophy that had no relevance to the new modern narratives of social change and moral progress.

Few Western philosophers found interest in and appreciation for Confucian and Neo-Confucian thinking ever since. An important exception, however, is German existence philosopher Karl Jaspers (1964) who rightly understood how Confucius' philosophy at its core is committed to the ideal of *ethical individuality*, not mere social adaptation. Quite some years earlier than Jaspers, another German philosopher, Georg Misch (1878–1965), argued that the logocentric and rationalistic turn in the Enlightenment thought has led to one-sided world-views which obstructed Western philosophers from relying upon conceptions of more synthetic and holistic thinking of East Asian philosophies (Misch 1950/1926). The tensions between the analytic notions of Enlightenment and synthetic thinking in Romanticism reflect the two major ways of understanding the ideas of human freedom and education for personhood. These tensions are constitutive but not exclusive for modern thinking.

In 2010 Stephen R. Palmquist edited an important volume with the title *Cultivating Personhood. Kant and Asian Philosophy* (Palmquist 2010). The 64 contributions gathered in this book of 845 pages seem to prove that the long-missed discussion between the East and the West has finally started at a level of a more open attitude towards cultural differences. The work of Immanuel Kant, who spoke so negatively about Confucius, from today's perspective in a truly embarrassing and discriminating way (cf. Roetz 2006, p. 109), is discussed in this volume; in many respects, the work is compared and confronted with Confucian philosophy. This mutual interest and sincere attempt to understand philosophies from a cross-cultural perspective is a good sign in today's globalized world, although long delayed. It shows that it is too easy and not fruitful to lead a discussion in the direction where one side reproaches 'Western' philosophers for their racial anthropologies, although this part of history is not deniable, and the other side stipulates that 'Eastern' philosophies mainly stand for traditionalism and conformism. More sophisticated and insightful philosophical discussions are much needed.

Unfortunately, in the case of philosophy of education, such an enterprise is even longer delayed; the cultural traditions of East Asia, most importantly Buddhism,

Confucianism, and Taoism, are still not well known among Western philosophers of education. In contrast to the humanistic tradition in the West, humanistic traditions of East Asia “have been largely neglected by scholars of humanism and historians of education” in the West (Kato 2015, p. 23). But, interestingly enough, the key notions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophies directly concern the ideals, processes and challenges of learning, education, and self-transformation, which can be compared with Western equivalences of liberal education, including, for example, the German concept of *Bildung*. Confucian and Western humanistic traditions have “remarkable similarities” as well as “deep differences” in such as the roles of written and spoken language and the significance of ritual propriety (Kato 2015, p. 31).

The cross-cultural inquiry on educational concepts from the East Asian tradition is an opportunity to the philosophers and practitioners of education for their self-understanding of educational ideas and practices on both personal and institutional levels. This inquiry can be said timely, especially given that the vocabularies in educational discourse today have been dominantly ‘West-centred’ for a long time, even while the ‘globalized’ world has become diverse across ethnicities, religions and cultures.

1.3 Confucius, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism

“Confucius lived in chaotic times and nobody was able to accept him”, the Confucian Liu Xiang (77–6 BC) stated (Roetz 2006, p. 9, translated by R.R.). Confucius (551–479 BC) lived in the Chunqiu-period (722–481 BC) which was characterized by wars; but it can also be described by new political and technical opportunities, an epoch of radical changes in which decisions between the old order and the new order have to be taken (Roetz 2006, p. 10). “Confucius” is a Latinized transcription of “Kongzi” (“Master Kong”), a variation of “Kong fuzi” (“Teacher Kong”). Kong is his family name, and Confucius’ name as child was *Qiu*. Born in Lu (today the province of Shandong), Confucius lost his parents early in his life. His parents have been impoverished, as it seems. Biographer Heiner Roetz quotes places in the *Lunyu* which may indicate in what way Confucius has been affected and shaped by his inconvenient origins: “I was of humble station when young. That is why I am skilled in many menial things. Should a gentleman be skilled in many things? No, not at all” (Confucius 1979, p. 97/Analects, IX.6).

Confucius was not able to make his ideas realized during his life time; he was without much success, especially with respect to the implementation of his political ideas, although during the long history of China his moral ideas became more and more significant for China’s moral, social and political philosophy. The term *Confucianism*, which is also known as *Ruism*, is highly problematic since it insinuates a unity of many various ‘Confucian’ philosophies and schools, which up to our times has never existed and still does not exist as an integrated body of thought (Paul 2010, p. 16). Yet, the term Confucianism has become a common convention,

even though everyone would agree it is problematic. Paul (*ibid.*) suggests that we should differentiate between Confucian philosophy, or Confucianism as a Chinese state-doctrine or ideology on the one hand, and popular Confucianism on the other hand, although there are no clear-cut borders among the notions of Confucianism understood as tradition, philosophy, religion, governmental approach, educational and humanistic concept and an everyday way of life. Another and useful way of differentiation is to separate (1) Classical Confucianism (*rujia*) from (2) Neo-Confucianism (*xin rujia*) and (3) Modern Confucianism (*dangdai xin rujia*; *xiandai xin rujia*; *dangdai xin ruxue*), as Paul suggests (Paul 2010, p. 18).

The major texts of Classical Confucianism are *Lunyu* (or *Analects*), *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. There are several dozens of rival Neo-Confucian philosophies, the most important exponents of which can be seen in *Zhu Xi* (1130–1200), the school of principle (*lixue*) and in *Wang Yangming* (1472–1529), the school of heart (*xinxue*). These are the rationalistic and idealistic versions of the great Neo-Confucian schools. Philosophically, Neo-Confucianism is the result of a long debate between (classical) Confucianism and Buddhism (which was widely established in China in the Tang dynasty, 618–907) and, in fact, it can be regarded as a form of Chinese *Renaissance*, the “re-birth” of Confucian thought after more than 1500 years. In the Song-Dynasty (960–1279), the most prominent Neo-Confucian at the time, Zhu Xi, selected four texts as a general introduction to Confucian thoughts, namely the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*), *The Analects* (*Lunyu*) and *Mencius*. This selection is known as the *Four Books*; they were used in Ming and Qing dynasties as the official curricula for civil service examinations. Another prominent selection of classical Confucian texts is the so-called *Five Classics* (*Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*). The study of the *Four Books* for the boys and young men was “arduous and not necessarily intellectually challenging or stimulating”; most time it was probably spent in rote memorization (Gardener 2007, p. xiii). The study was necessary in order for young boys to succeed at the first stage of the civil service examinations, which was carried out at the district level, and then to move on to another level of examination in the provincial capital. If they are successful there, they are qualified to participate in the final level of examinations in the imperial capital. The *Four Books* “were considered sacred texts, for they were the direct words and teachings of the great sages of antiquity, men whose exemplary wisdom and virtues served as an eternal model for the ages” (Gardener 2007, p. xv). One therefore must think of the significance of these books similar to the Bible in the West; its “passages, lines, and terms (...) became part of the *lingua franca* in China” (*ibid.*). For hundreds of years from 1300 to 1900, examination candidates were expected to demonstrate their mastery of the *Four Books* as well as of *Zhu Xi*’s comments on them, and their performances were the result of hard rote learning efforts. Nevertheless, this impressive activity and eagerness should not be directly associated with the idea of the *pleasure of learning* as introduced and emphasized in the *Analects*.

Confucian and neo-Confucian thoughts on metaphysics, ethics, reading and literature, government and the philosophical reflections on the Chinese history of ideas with its heterodoxical system including Buddhism and Taoism do not create a

uniform edifice of ideas; it has rather formed various tendencies within the great community of philosophical scholars whose educational thoughts and world-views can be in one or another way traced back to the name of Confucius. With the new rise of Confucian thinking in the eleventh century at the latest, which was much later named as Neo-Confucianism, Confucian trends became obvious in their differentiation and emphasis. For example, whereas, according to Wing-Tsit Chan (1967), Wang Yang-ming's *Instructions on the Practical Living* represents the major work of the *idealistic* wing of Neo-Confucianism, the *Chin-ssu lu* (近思錄) is the major work of the *rationalistic* wing of neo-Confucianism. "It is no exaggeration to say (...)", Chan stated, that the *Chin-ssu lu* "has been the most important book in China for the last 750 years" (Chan 1967, p. ix). Until the sixties of the last century only a fraction of the Neo-Confucian works has been translated into Western languages.⁷ This particular book was written and compiled in 1175 during the Song dynasty (960–1279), almost 17 centuries after the birth of the *Lunyu* (or *Analects*). In *Principle and Practicality; Essay in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning*, edited in 1979 by Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, de Bary writes about the Song dynasty:

Despite their access to power and the benevolent patronage of Song rulers, the Song Confucians had encountered human limitations in the executing of their grand designs. Last disillusionment and indifference, apathy or despair, Zhu Xi, in the twelfth century, readjusted and reordered his human priorities. The consequence was his intensification of the effort to articulate Neo-Confucian metaphysics and to develop a practical system of spiritual and intellectual cultivation, centering on the ideal of the sage ... (de Bary 1979, p. 10)

In this process, Neo-Confucianism developed features with strong resemblances to European Renaissance and its central topics such as "the dignity of man, the immortality of the soul, the unity of truth. Each of these has a close counterpart in the central doctrines of neo-Confucianism. Though the second theme, the immortality of the soul, is expressed in terms quite different from Confucian neo-Confucians had a religious or mystical view of the self as united with all other creatures on this universe in such a way as to transcend its finite limitations. This is found most characteristically in neo-Confucian accounts of the attainment of sagehood as an experience of the realization of the true self, which is based on the doctrine that 'humaneness unites man with Heaven-and-Earth and all things'" (de Bary 1979, p. 10–11). In the Chinese case, de Bary explains, the "reaffirmation of humane values took on a special quality as a reaction *against* Buddhism; but the certain characteristic features of neo-Confucianism showed the influence of Buddhism as well. The net result, then, was a humanistic revival which did not so much result in a decline of spirituality as in a transformation of it" (p. 7). Be it this or another way, it may seem appropriate to say that there is a likeness between the Renaissance return to a classical heritage in the eleventh-century in Europe and the revival and restoration of Confucianism in the twelfth century in China.

⁷The translation of the *Chin-ssu lu*, according to Wing-Tsit Chan, at least, was "imperative"; it has been "long overdue". The translation of 1967 includes many comments by Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholars. Another reader on (and of) Zhu Xi, called "Further Reflections on Things at Hand", has been published in 1991.

1.4 Learning as Thinking

Among the various insights that today's readers may acquire from Confucian and Neo-Confucian literature, one aspect seems to stand out among others: learning can be considered as a *virtue*, even a *meta-virtue*, as a form of life or a mode of self-formation of the person. It does not seem exaggerating to state that Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy is, to a large extent, a *philosophy of learning and self-transformation*. Taken this way, educationalists may be given precious opportunities for critical reflections on today's rather instrumentalist understanding of learning. The Chinese word *xue* (學, xue, learning) plays a major role in the *Analects* (Confucius 1979). There is no doubt that Confucius took “*xue* to be central to be a human person”, for it is “the basis and source of becoming a human person”, and it is at the same time an „“instinctive disposition” as well as “reflective (disposition) in that we must go beyond our instincts to learn” (Cheng Chung-yi 2018, p. 57). Confucian and Neo-Confucian thinking include a great variety of insights into the personal, social, and spiritual preconditions, necessities and limits of learning as self-transformation, which, by confirmation and contrast, enrich today's educational discussions. It is inspiring to focus on the parallels between Western humanistic concepts of learning and education, on the one hand, and the thoughts and insights as presented in the Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts, on the other hand. A crucial difficulty is to differentiate between *normative* and *descriptive* aspects or statements, in both Confucian and neo-Confucian notions of and Western humanistic concepts of learning and self-transformation. For philosophers of education, the Confucian insights into the *ethos of learning* might be of more relevance than their insights to the notions of moral philosophy and moral psychology, which are usually attributed to this approach (cf. Ivanhoe 1993; Shun 2010). Yet, the various Confucian concepts of learning are not separable from the basic moral and anthropological orientations of and their corresponding assumptions of Confucian thoughts and world-views.

To some degree, Confucian and Neo-Confucian perspectives on learning and self-transformation can be reconstructed by the concepts of *negativity* and negative morality which are close to the *aporetic* style of Socratic thinking, as presented in the earlier phase of Plato's work. It remains striking that Confucius and Socrates lived at about the same period of time (Socrates 469–399 BC, Confucius 551–479 BC). The parallels and differences between Confucius and Socrates (Plato, respectively) have been an object for quite many inquiries (cf. Kwak 2018; McEwan 2016). It is often neglected that the role of *critique* and critical reflection play a crucial role in “pedagogies” both Socratic and Confucian. Yet, “self-criticism”, the capacity to critique and the openness towards criticism from others, is an important aspect in the *Analects* (Confucius 1979) as well as in the *Xunzi*,⁸ in which it is

⁸ Xunzi is a classical Confucian philosopher (298–220 BC). His name, Xunzi, is also the title of his work (Xunzi 2014). Xunzi has been neglected for a long time, compared to Confucius and Mencius, but the interest in the *Xunzi* as the text has increased much in the last decades in the West.

argued that critique is an necessary element for the development of humaneness and the possibility of self-cultivation (Paul 2010, p. 36).

To be interested in Confucianism is one thing, and how to read the Confucian Classics today is another (Cheng Chung-yi 2018, p. 107). Cheng discusses various ways: “Classicists aim to get at the ‘true’ meanings of the texts, thus suggest that the reader need to be equipped with the art of philology so as to be able to overcome the great expanse of time that lies between the modern reader and the ancient texts” (ibid.). Classicist or historical approaches, as significant and insightful as they really are, may fail to show the modern relevance of Confucian Classics, an attempt that is followed by some philosophers. By referring to Lao Sze-kwong, Cheng is focusing on such a reading strategy which implies (1) identifying the philosophical problem of the text at stake; (2) reconstructing “the line of thinking, reasoning, and argumentation revealed in the text, which will lead to the answers of the questions, and (3) finally evaluate the effectiveness of the answer by any possible criticism” (Cheng Chung-yi 2018, p. 108f.). Such an endeavor does not promise to be successful only by the exclusive use of an analytical approach. It rather seems that the reader also has to open himself and herself to acknowledge and recognize the relevance of *metaphysical* notions and questions; he or she has to show respect for philosophical ideas in general and a willingness to use his or her imaginative capacity in order to better understand.

The Neo-Confucian idea of “*learning by thinking*” (cf. Reichenbach 2018) is exemplary for the Confucian insights into the meaning of epistemic virtues – most of all modesty in the evaluation of one’s own knowledge. It is true that one finds many passages in the *Chin-ssu lu* which suggest that *memorization* is necessary but not enough. In the center of educational progress and perfection lies the occupation with the not yet known:

We must try to know what we do not yet know, and to correct what is not good in us, however little. This is the improvement of our moral nature. In studying books, search for moral principles. In compiling books, appreciate what ultimate purposes they have. Do not just copy them. In addition, know much about words and deeds of former sages and worthies. This is the improvement of our inquiry and study. Do not relax for a moment. Keep on like this for three years and there will be progress (*Chin-ssu lu*, II, 94, [1967, p. 83])

To a large extent, the passages on learning in the *Chin-ssu lu* are about the right attitude of successful learning, the ethos of learning which includes the learner’s confidence, equability, persistence, and, most of all, modesty. The latter can be experienced in the willingness to learn from people with socially inferior status.⁹ Thinking of oneself as being mature and experienced will be an obstacle for learning and therefore for moving on to progress in the personal development. Even

⁹“Many people think they are mature and experienced and therefore are not willing to learn from their inferiors. Consequently, they remain ignorant all their lives. Some people regard themselves as the first ones to know moral principles and for them there is no such thing as ignorance. Consequently, they too are not willing to learn from inferiors. Because they are never willing to learn, they think of many things that deceive themselves and others. They are willing to remain ignorant throughout their lives” (*Chin-ssu lu*, II, 98, [1967, p. 94]).