

Nothing but the Truth¹

Ching-fai Ng
Hong Kong Baptist University
BNU-HKBU United International College

Abstract

Education has had a long journey in different societies with different cultural backgrounds. All-rounded education has long been advocated in this long journey. Education today should emphasise not only teaching knowledge and skills but also nurturing people with morality and integrity. While liberal arts education has flourished in the West in recent years, by revisiting the approach and practice of education in the East and West throughout history, traditional Chinese education is suggested to be highly akin to the liberal arts education of today. Knowledge explosion, recent rapid scientific development, and also the impact of COVID-19 present severe challenges to higher education of our time. To deal with these challenges and for building a better future, a liberal-arts approach to education should be seriously considered by universities all over the world.

Keywords: liberal arts education, all-rounded education, higher education

¹ This article is based on the speech delivered by the author at the Honorary Doctorate Distinguished Lecture of Hong Kong Baptist University on 23 November 2020.

Corresponding author: Ching-fai Ng. E-mail: cfng@uic.edu.cn

What I would like to focus on today is education, and on higher education to be exact, partly because this is an area I happen to know a little bit about. More importantly, it is an area which has such multiple impacts on society that it can be considered an abiding subject by any measure.

The first question we would like to ask is what education is all about. This question seems to be superfluous, particularly in an audience like this. Nonetheless, please bear with me and allow me to accompany you to travel through a time tunnel in order to go back 2000

years to see what our ancestors had to say about the subject.

The first person, who you must be quite familiar with, is Confucius (551-479 BC). According to him, education should be to seek truth, embrace virtue, practise compassion, and become immersed in the arts (至于道，据于德，依于仁，游于艺). In other words, it is all-rounded education. We all know Confucius also advocated six arts – rites, music and dance, archery (see Figure 1), horsemanship, calligraphy, and mathematics (礼、乐、射、御、书、数).

Figure 1

An Archery Class at UIC



Note. The picture shown here was not taken at the time of Confucius, but during an archery class at BNU-HKBU United International College (UIC) not long ago.

Now, let's turn to the West to see what Aristotle (384 BC) had to say. According to him, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." This means that you have to be able to think critically, but, at the same time, to be able to accept different views.

When you talk about modern universities, there is a person that I suppose is the most frequently quoted: Cardinal John Newman (1801-1890). His book *The Idea of University* has become a classic. According to him, "It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view

of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them." Moreover, he said, "A university training aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind and purifying the national taste..." In other words, he advocated that the universities should be leaders rather than followers in society when generating ideas and concepts. It means, inter alia, universities have a social responsibility. He also said, "Certainly, a liberal education does manifest itself in a courtesy, propriety, and polish of word and action... It brings the mind into form..." In short, this is the

Figure 2

Front Entrance of Bai Lu Dong Academy



kind of manner an educated person should possess.

Although it is true that in recent years, liberal arts education is flourishing in the West, particularly in the USA where there are a great number of outstanding institutions, few people are aware that the formal systematic education in early China bears resemblance to the liberal arts education of today. Therefore, let us go back to the times of academies in China and, once again, allow me to accompany you through a time tunnel.

This time is about 1,000 years ago, a little more recent. I would like to intro-

duce to you some of the most celebrated academies in China. The first one is Bai Lu Dong Academy (白鹿洞书院), located on Lu Mountain, Jiangxi and established in the late Tang Dynasty. It was remodelled or overhauled by Zhu Xi (朱熹) in the Song Dynasty. The picture below shows the front entrance of Bai Lu Dong Academy (Figure 2).

The second one is the Yue Lu Academy (岳麓书院; Figure 3), located in Changsha (长沙), Hunan (湖南). In this academy, a historical, famous joint lecture was given by Zhu Xi and Zhang Shi (张轼). It is also known as the

Figure 3

Front Entrance of Yue Lu Academy



“Academy of a Thousand Years”. They had very heavyweight alumni, such as Wang Fuzhi (王夫之), Wei Yuan (魏源), Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠), Zeng Guofan (曾国藩), and others. At the front entrance of Yue Lu Academy, there is an interesting couplet in Chinese that says “惟楚有才，于斯为盛”，meaning that there is ample talent in Chu (Hunan and Hubei) and here they flourish. This is a very upbeat kind of declaration.

The next academy I would like to introduce is the Ying Tian Fu Academy (应天府书院), located in Shangqiu (商丘), Henan (河南). This academy has a very interesting curriculum, which I will mention later on.

The fourth one I would like to introduce to you is Song Yang Academy (嵩阳书院), which is located on Song Mountain (嵩山), Henan. This academy was the powerhouse of Confucianism. The brothers Cheng Hao (程颢) and Cheng Yi (程颐) headed this academy and brought Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism under the same roof, thus opening a new path for Lixue (理学). At this academy, Sima Guang (司马光) wrote several chapters of History of Mirror (资治通鉴). Another politician general, Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹), also taught here together with Yang Shi (杨时) and Zhu Xi. At the front entrance of

Song Yang Academy, there is another interesting couplet in Chinese, “满院春色催桃李，一片丹心育新人。” In English, it means “With an orchard full of spring, fruits aplenty. With a heart pure, new talents galore.” The emphasis here is on the heart; putting the heart into education to nurture the young.

The fifth one is Shi Gu Academy (石鼓书院), located on Shi Gu Mountain (石鼓山), Hunan. This is the oldest academy in China. Compared to University of Bologna in Italy that was established in 1009, this one was established in 806-820. Han Yu (韩愈) of the Tang Dynasty, Su Shi (苏轼), Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐), Zhu Xi, and Zhang Shi of the Song Dynasty, and Zhan Ruoshui (湛若水) of the Ming Dynasty taught in this academy. On this campus, there is a sculpture of seven masters, with Han Yu, Zhu Xi and so on, (Figure 4), spanning over two dynasties.

The final one is Dong Lin Academy (东林书院), located in Wuxi (无锡), Jiangsu (江苏). This was established by Yang Shi, who was a student of Cheng Hao, in the Song Dynasty. This academy was remodelled and overhauled by Gu Xiancheng (顾宪成), a celebrated scholar of the Late Ming Period. According to the historical record, the academy under him served as “a magnet for many

Figure 4

Sculpture of Seven Masters in Shi Gu Academy



aspiring young scholars (天下学子慕名而来)。” At the front entrance of the academy, there is a couplet, “此日今还在，当幸道果南”； which translates into English as “Seeing the academy today, gratified to have our philosophy to be passed on.” The story behind it is that Cheng Hao was very pleased that his student, Yang Shi, could establish an academy of this high calibre so that his philosophy could be passed on.

So much for the “hardware (*ying jian* 硬件)”², but what about the “software

(*ruan jian* 软件)”³? The characteristics of the liberal arts education in traditional Chinese academies may be summarised into six characteristics.

The first one is “the goal of education is not to impart skills”. This is demonstrated in the promulgation of Bai Lu Dong Academy (朱熹白鹿洞书院揭示), “To make it very clear, it is not for visibility, not for personal reputation, not for personal gain.” This is really a student-centred type of all-rounded education. On top of that, at Bai Lu Dong

² In the context of contemporary Chinese education, *yingjian* refers to all forms of facilities, devices, technologies, and entities.

³ Correspondingly, *ruanjian* is an analogy of a wide range of ideas, thoughts, philosophies, and theories.

there is something called the Bai Lu Dong Doctrines, written by Zhu Xi. The doctrines are very comprehensive and rich. Here, I would like to pick a few of them to illustrate, “为学之序，博学之，审问之，慎思之，明辨之，笃行之。” In English, these are “Learn extensively, inquire thoroughly, reflect prudently, discriminate clearly, practise devotedly.” This is also a very popular quotation. There is also “己所不欲，勿施于人”， which is “Do not do to others if you do not want others to do the same to you” in English. All of these have become the day-to-day philosophy of Chinese culture.

The second characteristic would be “advocate broad knowledge, encourage students to raise questions and think deeply”. In other words, students are required and expected to entertain different schools of thought. For example, the basic curriculum of Ying Tian Fu Academy encompassed Confucianism, Mohism and Taoism, which was very inclusive. As far as the pedagogy was concerned, the students were required to conduct independent study, but at the same time engage in dialogue with their peers and raise intelligent questions. This kind of education is in stark contrast to the general impression of ancient Chinese education as “spoon-feeding”. By the way, I would like to add a footnote about

Zhu Xi, who actually advocated raising doubt in the learning process. According to him, progress could be only made by resolving the puzzles. In sum, all the academies had their respective lively pedagogies.

The third one is “the open, inclusive academic environment”. In other words, it is a free speech tradition. To illustrate this, I want to introduce the so-called joint lecture (会讲制度). What is a joint lecture? A joint lecture involves two to three masters with probably slightly different views gathering together, and they interact with one another or debate with one another in front of an audience. From this, you can see it was very open at that time. The masters, expectedly, were tolerant of different views. Next, I want to talk about three such very interesting lectures.

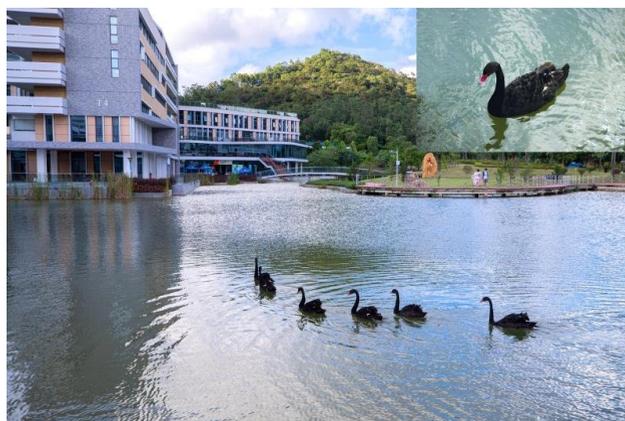
In 1167, Zhu Xi and Zhang Shi held a joint lecture in Yue Lu Academy that was overwhelmingly well attended. According to the record, the number of carriages taking people to the lecture was so huge that all the wells in the neighbourhood dried up (一时舆马之众，饮池水立涸). This was a really historical-cultural event. The lecture lasted three days and three nights, but no consensus was reached at the end so they agreed to disagree.

The next lecture I would like to talk about is the so-called “Goose Lake Rendezvous” (鹅湖之会). In 1175, Zhu Xi invited Lu Jiuyuan (陆九渊), who was actually his rival in terms of their views on

philosophy, to talk about Xinxue (心学) and Lixue (理学) in a joint lecture at Bai Lu Dong. It was a major historic literary feast, with a far-reaching influence on Chinese philosophy (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Geese Swim on a Lake at UIC's Campus



Note. The picture shown here was not taken at Goose Lake in Jiangxi. It shows a scene at UIC in the morning where geese have been attracted to the small lake on campus. Look at them, swimming leisurely. Aren't they cute? Perhaps you can call it a modern version of the goose lake.

The third lecture was in 1181. Zhu Xi, again, invited Lu Jiuyuan to Bai Lu Dong to lecture on a chapter of Analects. According to the historical record, the lecture was enjoyed by an audience of 1,000 farmers and inhabitants in the community and some of them even wept during the lecture (环而听者千人，田夫野老有闻而泣者). What a moving

scene of a cultural event reflecting the openness of Bai Lu Dong! It was amazing that they could reach the ordinary people and did not confine themselves within the walls of the academy. Inter alia, it demonstrated that the intellectual level of the common folk could be so amazingly high.

The fourth characteristic is an “in-

timate teacher-student relationship.” In Chinese, we talk about “言传身教 (Using words to convey, using deeds to illustrate).” The principals were nor-

mally celebrated scholars and they had a high level of mortality and, thus, were well-respected by their students (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Students Serving Tea at the Appreciation Ceremony



Note. This picture here showing the teacher-student relationship was taken recently at UIC at an Appreciation Ceremony (敬师礼). This annual event was organised by the students with no involvement from the teachers. Here they are shown serving tea to the professors.

The fifth one is “whole person education”. The academies normally emphasised the combination of teaching knowledge or skills with moral character building. Apart from formal lectures, there were a variety of cultural and art events which served educational purposes, such as music ensembles, tours, visits, farewells, and sacrifice rituals. On all these occasions, students would

compose impromptu poems and essays. Here I would like to dwell on a particular activity: sacrifice rituals (祭祀). This was not something superstitious, as the name suggests, but it allowed the students to pay homage to some historical, highly-revered individuals, and then to reminisce about their good deeds, so as to consider them as role models in life.

The sixth one is “concern for the

well being of the community and the country”. The academies normally encouraged students to care for the people and the politics of the country. The most representative example is the Dong Lin Academy. According to Confucianism Cases in Ming Dynasty (明儒学案), scholars who scrutinised critically the policies and deeds of the government were mainly from Dong Lin, drawing fear from the top authorities (天下君子以清议归于东林, 庙堂亦有畏忌). In the middle hall of Dong Lin Academy, there is a couplet written by Gu Xiancheng, “风声雨声读书声, 声声入耳; 家事国事天下事, 事事关心 (The sound of the wind, the rain and the book chanting, loud and clear; the affairs of the family, the state and the whole world, all our concerns).” This couplet is one of the most celebrated patriotic couplets and has been regarded over the years (even to date) by many Chinese intellectuals as their motto.

To summarise, according to what we have just discussed, whether in the East or West, in ancient or modern times, the essence of an ideal education would be student-centred, broad and elegant, as well as encompassing knowledge, morality and integrity. It seems that whether it is Aristotle, Newman or Confucius, they all embraced this common denominator.

Let us now turn to something more recent – the challenges facing higher education today. Beginning in the 80s of last century, due to the knowledge explosion, the undergraduate curriculum needed to be changed and broadened. As knowledge is now created so quickly, no matter how much stuff you put into an undergraduate curriculum, you are not going to have enough. Furthermore, maybe some of the stuff you put in will be outdated several years after the students graduate, or even before. So, that is why a broad curriculum is called for, particularly with an emphasis on lifelong learning. Moreover, due to rapid scientific development, particularly in the AI and big data areas, some people surmise that robots may do many jobs in the future and conventional jobs could be eliminated. In this situation, only those jobs with creativity would be important. In view of this, there is a requirement for talents with high EQ and creativity, which brings us to music and arts.

On top of this challenge, the impact of COVID-19 was so huge that the whole world will be different. How different? We don't know yet, but we do know that it is going to be different. That means it will bring new challenges to us. Plus, in the face of what happened in Hong Kong in the past 15 months in which many

students got involved, we cannot help but ask the question “Whither the Hong Kong education?” In my humble opinion, I think we have no choice but to go back to the fundamentals; in other words, what education is all about. I think it should aim to educate the heart as well as to educate the mind. We should be bold enough to proclaim that our mission is to cultivate our students to be Junzi (君子, exemplary people). In other words, they should be equipped with adequate knowledge, the ability to differentiate between virtue and vice, beauty and ugliness, and hold compassion for fellow human beings. These are exactly the very core of education.

The next question should be: what should our liberal arts education be today? Apart from making references to the West, especially the US, Oxbridge or Heidelberg, for that matter, I think for today’s purposes, we should inject a new element into our liberal arts education. As we have seen, traditional Chinese education has deep roots in liberal arts education, so Chinese culture provides very rich nutrients for us to add to our education. Just to name a few, you can look at the idea of “harmony and diversity (和而不同),” “the golden mean (中庸之道),” “do not do to others if you do not want others to do the same to

you (己所不欲, 勿施于人).” The last mentioned is actually not only relevant for interpersonal relationships, but also relevant between different countries and cultures. We believe that with adequate exposure to Chinese culture, our students can take pride in their own cultural heritage and also, at the same time, be able to appreciate the fine culture of others with self-confidence.

Finally, I would like to surmise that there is no entity called a perfect person, nor is any political system today a perfect one. Every system will have its long suit and shortcomings. We have to learn to embrace tolerance, openness, inclusiveness, and empathy. The world is like a plant kingdom with a diversity of flowers and plants extruding multiple fragrances, and, as just said, we want our students to take pride in our heritage of culture and know how to appreciate the culture of others. We want our students to be able to appreciate Western opera as well as Peking opera, to be able to learn about Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Zola, Goethe and Kawabata, as well as Tang Xianzu (汤显祖) and Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹). I think if our students can be educated like this, they can be a true person of culture, a person caring for his/her own society and country, and a world citizen.

A very celebrated Chinese sociolo-

gist, Fei Xiaotong or Fei Hsiao-Tung (费孝通), once said “Every form of beauty has its uniqueness. We should appreciate other forms of beauty with openness. With a diversity of beauties, the world will be blessed with harmony (各美其美, 美人之美, 美美与共, 世界大同).” Indeed, if we could achieve what Fei Xiaotong suggested, we should be able to say NO to “Clash of Civilizations”. Only then we could avoid unnecessary wars, avoid the death and suffering of countless innocent people, and only then humankind can have a better, braver to-

morrow.

So the truth is that the liberal arts approach to education is the key to a better tomorrow for Hong Kong and the world. Here, I am not suggesting that all universities should be a liberal-arts type. What I’m saying is that the liberal arts approach should be adopted or considered by all kinds of universities, East and West, and only then we will have a better tomorrow.

Thank you all for your patience in tolerating this seminar with an over-aged student.