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Educational Thought of Confucianism and Its Influence on Educational Reform in Vietnam

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Abstract

This essay is devoted to the analysis of Confucian theory of education based on its basic components: objectives, content, subjects of education, and methods of teaching. Confucianism is an extensive philosophical theory of Ancient China, which focuses mainly on political, social, ethical, and human problems in order to control human behavior and stability of society. The findings of this research support the values of Confucian theory of education, including the importance of morality in the educational process, methods of teaching, the importance of educa-

tors, the creation of a humanistic educational environment, and continuous learning. These values may be adopted and developed within the framework of the contemporary educational reforms in Vietnam. In the context of the presented paper, Confucian theory of education is analyzed as an age-old educational philosophy of Vietnam that has significantly affected the contemporary Vietnamese philosophy of education.

Keywords: confucianism, educational thought, educational reform in Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

The basic essence of the thought of Confucian education includes the philosophy of man and society, the educational purpose, the method of learning and teaching that is humane, thereby putting the individual at the heart of self-cultivation and development. From this perspective, some factors include the use of morality in the process of education, the aim of being a “real person”, order in the nation and peace in the world; as well as the methods of “enlightening people intellectually” and “educating people through moral transformation” are seen as crucial components to make Confucianism education unique. The thought of Confucian education is not only deeply philosophical, but also is the complete ideology system, which had been significantly influential on eastern educational tradition, particularly Vietnam.

Throughout the whole history of the Vietnamese nation, Confucianism played an important role in the development of the Vietnamese culture and education. This idea originated from China and spread to Vietnam in the 2nd century BC, which was the orthodox ideology under feudal dynasties, thus, making its impact significantly deep on people’s thinking, ethics, lifestyle, as well as the educational and social governance of Vietnamese [1]. By virtue of its systematic ideology, especially the focus on morality, rites, the teacher’s prestige and the habit of studying, Confucianism was the ideology that contributed to the establishment of the educational tradition in Vietnam [2]. Nowadays, the country is trying to carry out a significant reform in education in accordance with Resolution 29-NQ/TW [3], towards creating modern and humanitarian education with comprehensive learners’ competency development. Therefore, selectively inheriting beneficial educational idea of history becomes one indispensable task.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Realizing the significance of education for society, philosophers have paid much attention to it throughout the history of humanity. For example, in ancient Greece, both Plato and Aristotle believed education to be an indispensable tool for developing citizens with good moral values for their ideal societies [4]. This approach was continued by numerous philosophers in subsequent times. Rousseau, Humboldt, and Dewey are all well-known educators who proposed revolutionary educational views that coincided with the development trends of their respective eras. In ancient China, Confucianism is a famous philosophical trend with a great impact on all spheres of social life. Regarding governance, Confucianism believes in using “rule by virtue” to educate citizens and considers it to be the primary method of “governing the nation” and “bringing peace under heaven.” Thus, Confucianism pays special attention to education. As most studies argue, education occupies a particularly crucial place in the Confucian philosophical system. It is required by Confucianism’s governance through virtue theory. Besides, we can find similarities in views of different philosophers; for instance, Aristotle stated that “education must suit the form of government” [4].

Philosophers have studied education from various aspects and with different content, which makes its meaning quite broad. Education should contain the spirit of enlightenment [5], humanistic spirit [6], and patriotic spirit. According to Dewey, the final goal of education is the implementation of democratic principles in education [7]. Rousseau, advocating natural disposition of human beings, proposed a natural education in order to ensure the freedom and equality of people, as he stated in *The Social Contract* [8]. Humboldt’s educational philosophy stressed the spirit of freedom in education [9].

Being developed as part of the philosophy in ancient China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Confucian educational philosophy includes a number of valuable elements. According to Nguyen et al., the main elements of Confucian education are the stress on morality, lifelong learning, and respect for teachers. Although these ideas can pose some challenges concerning their applicability at present, they still make valuable contributions to the promotion of ethics and social responsibility [10]. The same opinion is shared by Muyunda et al.; they claim that the categories such as ren (benevolence), li (ritual propriety), and zhi (wisdom) have already been incorporated in modern Chinese education [11].

Some new approaches by Li Li et al. refute the old idea that Confucian education emphasizes memorization and submission to authorities [12]. Marginson states the importance of Confucianism as an ideology that contributes to the development of education in China, Korea, and Singapore due to its value of knowledge and competitive selection [13]. The impact of Confucianism on the development of academic culture, competitiveness, and academic achievements has also been noted by Chou et al. [14].

Debates on the contributions of Confucianism in the realm of education continue in the modern environment. At present, Vietnam undertakes the radical reform of education aimed at satisfying the requirements of development of Vietnam as a country in the context of industrialization and modernization in the age of international integration. Along with the implementation of the achievements made worldwide, the reform needs to rely on the national traditions, including valuable elements of Confucian education. The objective analysis of Confucianism’s impact on the education of Vietnam will make possible to develop the appropriate policy.

3. THE FUNDAMENTAL CONTENT OF CONFUCIAN EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

3.1. ON THE GOALS OF CONFUCIAN EDUCATION

In the overall framework of Confucian educational thought, the aim of education plays an important role and serves as a basis for understanding the whole system of teaching content, methods of imparting knowledge, and approaches to the development of manhood. Confucius and Confucian thinkers were interested not only in passing their knowledge but also in the cultivation of morals, developing character and leading people to noble aspirations. In general, three basic purposes of Confucian education can be distinguished: the development of character traits of an individual, the development of virtuous and talented officials for the service of their motherland and illumination of innate morals leading to the highest virtue.

Firstly, the main purpose of learning according to Confucius was self-cultivation (*tu than*). In Confucian ideology, personal moral cultivation is understood as developing oneself as a person of high morality, good character, who would act according to his virtues and help to keep order in society. In Confucian beliefs, the ideal personality should develop on the basis of the Five Constants (*ngũ thường*): benevolence (*ren*), propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), wisdom (*zhi*) and trustworthiness (*xin*), with *ren* (love of people, compassion towards others) being the basis of all the virtues. Therefore, the aim of Confucian education is not the acquisition of status, wealth, power or fame, but perfection of oneself morally, i.e., becoming a gentleman (*junzi*)—the person who acts according to justice, helps to preserve order in society and behaves decently towards others. According to Confucianism, man is born with pure, natural and innocent nature, which is immune to the outside influences: "The essence of humanity is the same, but due to different environments, people end up far from each other" [15, p. 527].

Secondly, in accordance with Confucian ideas, human nature is originally good, and people have innate moral sprouts such as love of people (*ren*), the feeling of shame (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and discernment between the good and bad (*zhi*). All these are known as four beginnings (*tu doan*)—four natural moral roots of people. However, external environment may change man's nature. "Confucianism holds that: 'Learning is a way to go back to our lost good hearts'" [15, p. 774]. So, studying and cultivation is viewed by Confucians as the way of restoring human nature, cultivating man's character and living in harmony with his surroundings.

However, some Confucians believed that human nature is by itself "evil". Hence, the purpose of education for them was leading people to righteousness. According to Xunzi:

Human nature is evil, while goodness arises through human effort. By nature, men are born with a disposition to seek pleasure; indulging in this nature leads to rivalry and lack of humility. By nature, men are jealous; indulging in this nature leads to cruelty without loyalty and faith. By nature, men yearn for sensual delights; indulging in this nature leads to lasciviousness without any propriety and morality. Therefore, if we follow human nature, rivalry will ensue, offences will follow, principles will be distorted, and cruelty will abound. Hence there must be teaching and laws to transform it, proprieties and morality to regulate it, only when this happens will humility, order, and proper government prevail. We find out very clearly thus that human nature is evil and goodness is made by human effort." [16, p. 354].

Thirdly, education in Confucianism is viewed as more than just the transmission of knowledge, but the cultivation of virtue, moral character and full development of human abilities. Its final goal is to create a stable, harmonious and sustainable society where each of us will live not only for himself but also for his fellow people. Confucianism teaches that in the past people learned for themselves but now they learn for others (*Co chi hoc gia vi ki, kim chi hoc gia vi nhan*). Besides reflecting ideals of Confucian education, this goal shows great vision about man's role in society and in history. Understanding these purposes will help us to see fundamental features of Confucian education better.

Moreover, another purpose of Confucian education was to train talented officials to govern the country. Since Confucius' time, the aim of education included not only self-cultivation but also ordering the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the whole world (*te gia - tri quoc - binh thien ha*). In Confucianism, the way of personal development is the constant progress from moral qualities cultivation to contribution into society and the motherland. So, besides self-development and self-fulfillment, learners study to perform social duties, particularly those of officials who represent Confucian principles of morality and conduct. In the *Great Learning*, it says: "The Way of the Great Learning consists of manifesting luminous virtue, in renovating the people, and reaching the highest good" [17, p. 77].

According to Confucian doctrine, ideal ruler is not a rich or powerful man, but a worthy and talented man (*hien tai*). Hence, the aim of education was the discovery, cultivation and selection of talented people for their nation. The examination system for the officials chosen from Confucian classics such as the Four Books (*Tu Thu*) and Five Classics (*Ngũ Kinh*) is the vivid embodiment of the idea.

3.2. ON THE OBJECTS OF EDUCATION IN CONFUCIANISM

As mentioned above, Confucianism highly valued people able to “govern the state and bring peace under heaven,” and the objects of education were the shi—able young men from a middle or noble family who wanted to study, pass the exams, and be appointed officials. In the book, the philosopher frequently talked about junzi (gentleman) and xiaoren (petty man). Hence, Confucius divided humanity into those categories not by their social origin but by their morals and behavior.

Junzi is a gentleman who acts by ideals, acts rightly, bases his behavior on ritual propriety, and subordinates his own interests to the common good. Xiaoren is an evil and immoral person who serves his own interest and desires. Thus, from the analysis presented above, it can be concluded that Confucian education did not have a strict division between the two groups since the Junzi were not a class of people; these were the people who had to achieve such qualities as being morally perfect in their behavior and thinking. The goal of Confucian education was the creation of Junzi—people developed mentally and morally, possessing the skills of ruling and transforming society.

At the same time, the Confucians were guided by another principle—“you jiao wu lei” (Huu giao, vo loi), or education for everyone [18, p. 85]. According to the teaching of Confucius, any person has the potential to learn and become virtuous and knowledgeable if he is provided with proper education. Therefore, no learning should be limited because of someone’s origin, class, or economic situation. For example, Confucius managed to train thousands of disciples who belonged to lower classes yet became excellent in terms of virtue and talent as a result of proper education. The principle of education for everyone is still valuable as a philosophical and ethical one, and it helps to understand the humanistic principle of education: every individual has the right to education as the opportunity of improving himself/herself.

3.3. ON THE TEACHING METHODS IN CONFUCIANISM

The approach “shu er bu zuo” (Thuat nhi bat tac) was often used when teaching within Confucianism. It meant that learners should have respect for the moral values, life experience, and knowledge that have been developed through long periods of time and thus should be studied. Accordingly, learners needed to start from gaining knowledge about what has existed first and then create their own works based on the inherited knowledge. The approach emphasized accuracy, carefulness, and loyalty to inherited knowledge. Teachers were not simply repeaters of inherited knowledge; they should know it profoundly enough and give guidance to learners so that they could study knowledge appropriately.

According to the Analects, Confucius said: “Thinking without learning leaves one in peril” [16, pp. 22–23]. He called on his students to reflect, asking them to be proactive, critical, and responsible so that knowledge and reflection could come to a harmonious combination. Such requirement could be seen as the progressive aspect of Confucianism because it believed that the combination of learning and thinking made it possible for individuals to gain profound and essential knowledge and thus prepared the ground for widening their comprehension and dialectical thought, leading to acquiring and utilizing knowledge scientifically and effectively.

Confucianism recognized that everyone could be educated. It was progressive since Confucianism was known to promote education actively. According to Confucius’ words recorded in the Analects: “You jiao wu lei” (Huu giao vo loi), education did not differentiate between people of high status and low status [19, p. 588].

4. DISCUSSION

Confucian philosophy about education is undoubtedly very valuable since it promotes the development of morality, preservation of ritualistic etiquette, development of love for studying, and directs people to take care of their family members and their nation. However, one should also admit the drawbacks of Confucian ideas connected with its hierarchy, discrimination against women, and conservative attitudes towards education. Therefore, taking into consideration moral traditions of Confucian educational philosophy and transforming its practices, content, and approach to teaching is a suitable direction for Vietnamese educational system. Thus, this research initiates a dialogue concerning the impact of Confucianism on the modern reform of education.

Confucianism came to Vietnam more than two thousand years ago and influenced different aspects of life in this country including education. Despite significant changes that have occurred in Vietnam, the core principles of Confucianism such as ren (humanity), yi (righteousness), li (etiquette), zhi (wisdom), and xin (integrity) managed to persist. They were used when developing the new educational orientation, contents, and approaches. Taking into account the comprehensive reform in Vietnam initiated by the resolution 29-NQ/TW (2013), it is crucial to reassess the significance of Confucian education in the modern conditions.

4.1. HIGHLIGHTING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MORALITY IN EDUCATION

In the course of Vietnam’s overall education renovation, emphasis on learners’ morality and quality has been increasing, as seen in the Party and State’s policy directions. One of the remarkable highlights can be the Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW

on fundamental and comprehensive educational renewal [3] pointing out "Shift strongly from mainly equipping learners with knowledge to comprehensively developing their competencies and qualities." This spirit does not only demonstrate the modern progress in education but also continues selectively some deep-rooted traditions of Eastern education philosophy, especially Confucianism education philosophy.

Confucius said, "The gentleman eats without seeking fullness, lives without seeking comfort, is diligent in work and cautious in speech, seeks out the virtuous to correct himself—thus he may be called one who loves learning" [20, p. 33]. Confucianism, based on a moral and humanism philosophy, considers education as the key to shaping human characters. In Confucianism, education not only aims to transfer knowledge to the learners but also, most importantly, to nurture morality to make up ideal human beings, who are junzi — having good ethics, intelligence, and social responsibility. According to Confucius, "to teach people, one must first teach the Way," meaning that education should start from the moral foundation. Ren, Li, Zhi, Xin, Yi are some qualities that have to be educated in Confucianism.

Such spirit is quite consistent with Vietnam's education orientation when comprehensive human development, including moral development as the priority, has been made the long-term vision of education. The Resolution 29 points out the necessity of training learners in order to equip them with not only "knowledge" but also "personality, morality, lifestyle, and life skills." It is clear evidence for the close link between Confucianism philosophy and contemporary Vietnamese education orientation, in the context of globalization and international integration.

Specifically, in practice, nowadays, moral education, life skill education, civic education, and character education are included in current teaching programs through subjects, experiences, and extracurricular education. Patriotic, compassionate, hard-working, honest, and responsible qualities—determined by the Ministry of Education and Training to form the curriculum of general education—are similar to Confucian's moral values.

The harmony between the spirit of moral education of Confucianism and the goal of comprehensive development in Resolution 29 is the best proof of the continuing value of Eastern cultural tradition in modernization of education. Highlighting the importance of morality education not only contributes to forming humanism education but also to making a responsible citizen generation capable of defending and developing the country in the new era.

4.2. APPLYING DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN ORDER TO REACH EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

In the framework of Confucian approach to education, concerning methods, apart from the approach to the concept of "thuat nhi bat tac," Confucianism—embodied mostly in Confucius himself—has formed an educational philosophy focused on self-cultivation, self-education, and personal qualities improvement. When learning, Confucius paid special attention to the process of thinking: "Learning without thinking is useless; thinking without learning is equally fruitless" [20, p. 36].

Apart from focusing on the process of transferring knowledge, the philosophy under discussion has laid stress on the learner's activity aimed at gaining knowledge and mastering it. As for the application of methods, Confucianism implies quite flexible use of various approaches to reach the desired outcomes in the educational process. In the context of globalization and digital transformation, the education in Vietnam is changing dramatically in regard to content, methods, and philosophy as well. Among the major changes one can note the shift from "knowledge transmission approach" to "personal qualities development." It is important to state that this kind of transformation should be considered not as just another methodological innovation but as a revolution in education philosophy that implies new goals and approaches.

The Confucian approach to learning that presupposed combining learning and reflection is quite consistent with modern approaches to active learning. According to this approach, students become the key participants of the learning process and explore and master knowledge using such techniques as group discussion, case study, project-based and experiential learning and other similar methods. Learners are encouraged not only to gain knowledge but also to think, analyze, criticize, and apply knowledge in practice, just like it was done by Confucius more than two thousand years ago. Modern educators no longer occupy the place of "omniscient transmitters." Instead, they become guides who promote active thinking in students and help them develop creative approaches to solving problems, which is very close to the philosophy of Confucianism.

4.3. TEACHERS' EMPHASIS, CREATION OF A HUMANISTIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, AND PROMOTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Confucianism held teachers in high regard as bearers of wisdom and morality—those who "transmit the Way, impart knowledge, and dispel doubts". Teachers were not only knowledge bearers but also spiritual teachers whose mission included awakening the ideas of life and orientation in moral principles among their wards. The idea of "respecting teachers and valuing the Way" (ton su trong dao) has been firmly embedded in Vietnamese culture and retains its significance for shaping a new educational environment where teachers combine roles of educators and mentors inspiring

both ethical and intellectual progress in their students.

Alongside curricula and content reform, moving the emphasis from mere transmission of knowledge to individual competency development makes teachers' role all the more significant. Contemporary teachers are not longer perceived as primary knowledge bearers but shift to being "organizers, guides, and companions" throughout the process of teaching. This implies the constant updating of teachers' qualification, skills and teaching methods in order to perform their duties effectively. However, keeping up the high level of morality of teachers and their capability to inspire their students is still highly necessary – fully complying with the spirit of Confucianism.

According to the teachings of Confucianism: "If schools were established from towns to prefectures, so that from the king's children down to the children of scholars and commoners all could study, then after ten years the upper would know how to guide the lower, and the lower would know how to serve the upper" [21, p. 556]. Teaching morality, lifestyle, and civic skills is particularly emphasized in Vietnam's new general education curriculum in order to produce not only educated but also socially aware citizens who will be responsible towards themselves, family, and country — just like in the Eastern culture idea that "the upper guides the lower, and the lower serves the upper".

Knowledge and moral development always went hand-in-hand in Confucianism and in modern reformed education system alike. As an example, Confucianism greatly appreciated the idea of "hoc nhi thoi tap chi, bat diec duyet ho" (To study and to practice regularly — what joy is greater than this?), which can be regarded as relevant to the needs of today's digital epoch, during which continuous updating of knowledge and skill acquisition become inevitable.

Confucianism saw education as an opportunity to make individuals useful not only to themselves but to society and the state as well. Education in contemporary Vietnam shares the same purpose by fostering globally conscious individuals with civic responsibilities towards community and nation.

4.4. NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF CONFUCIAN EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

While there were many positive aspects of Confucian educational thought that contributed to the success of Vietnamese education and continue to do so, there are also aspects of Confucianism that should not be pursued in the context of current objectives and subject matter taught within education in Vietnam. For example, these include moral obedience in preference to stimulating critical thinking among learners, one-sided teaching and learning process, preference for passing exams rather than mastering useful knowledge or developing professional skills.

One aspect worth mentioning about classic Confucianism is that, in addition to stressing moral values and virtue cultivation, the focus was laid on studying literature, canonical texts, and passing examinations. As a result, learners often had problems with developing their practical, vocational, and professional skills – something extremely important during modernization and integration into the global economy. It means that modern education must ensure an equal emphasis on morality, knowledge, and practical application thereof.

Confucianism, by nature, promoted an idea of order within society based on the relationships of "ruler–subject", "father–son", and "teacher–student". In other words, it was a type of teaching-learning approach that was oriented towards subordination, obedience, and conformity with established moral norms. In modern education, it implies encouraging autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking – essential components of success in the era of globalization.

Since feudal times, Confucian ideology was closely connected with the civil examination system aimed at selecting government officials for the feudal state. As a result, people developed a mentality according to which education was meant to help them obtain degrees, i.e., achieve success. This trend became particularly noticeable in modern education, when learners study only because they need to get good grades or pass examinations successfully. In modern times, education has become a lifelong process aimed at acquiring competence, sharing information with other members of the community, and making valuable contributions, rather than social status. Thus, the examination-oriented approach of Confucian education implies rote learning, memorization, and lack of practical application of knowledge, i.e., an outdated phenomenon. In modern times, people tend to learn not for an examination, but for developing professionally and contributing to society.

The Confucian practice of *shu er bu zuo* ("transmit but do not create") may still have certain merits from the standpoint of the philosophy of science and education. From this point, one can think about academic ethics, such as avoiding plagiarism or protecting intellectual property of researchers. If used blindly without any creativity and critical thinking skills, however, this concept might hinder scientific achievements. Modern education requires combining tradition with innovation and creativity. Modern education, unlike Confucian education, focuses more on creativity and personal growth.

As for Confucian education methods (lecturing and listening), they are based on a traditional, passive relationship between a teacher and a student. It contradicts the modern conception of the role of a learner who is considered autonomous, creative, and active.

5. CONCLUSION

The influence of Confucian educational philosophy and its humanism, learning all life long, respect to knowledge, the image of the teacher in particular cannot be underestimated throughout the history and modernity of the education system in Vietnam. Against the background of radical reforms in education today, selective inheritance of the positive aspects of Confucianism is highly relevant both theoretically and practically. Nevertheless, to ensure innovation and international integration of the education system, it is necessary to use a dialectical approach that should combine the preservation of traditions and overcoming certain shortcomings of Confucian philosophy in terms of education. This way only Vietnamese education will achieve holistic development focusing on humanism as a dominant value of education system and bringing up world citizens capable of independent thinking and creativity.

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