

Symposium for an Asian Link  
**Challenges to the Confucian Concept of the Educated Person as “the Noble Man” (君子) in the Korean Context**

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What does it mean to cultivate ‘humanity’ in education? What does it have to do with the ‘humanistic’ education? The humanistic education is supposed to cultivate humanity in us. But what sort of humanity is worth cultivating? Different traditions of the humanistic education may respond differently. How have the Koreans traditionally conceived the view of the educated in her humanistic tradition of Confucianism? When I was young, a school textbook for moral education in junior high schools specified three types of the educated: man of good character, man of high knowledge, man of wide fame; it was taught that ‘man of good character’ deserved the genuine name of the educated. (As a young adolescent, it was really touching to come to know this.) When we Koreans say that we expect the school to cultivate ‘humanity’ in youngsters, the cultivation of ‘humanity’ usually means that of ‘good character’. And the core of the good character in the Korean context is the disposition to conform to social norms, i.e., obeying to teachers and the elderly and knowing how to behave in relation to other people of different statuses, disposition associated with the essential Confucian virtue of ‘Ren’(仁), namely, love of others.

This sense of good character was considered to be the basis of ‘the noble man’(君子), the moral ideal of Confucianism, which dominated the Korean society for a long time since the establishment of the Chosun dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. But the ultimate purpose of the noble man’s life is his self-cultivation as a way of finding ‘the Way’ through the scholarly studies of four classical texts: *the Analects of Confucius*, *the Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, *the Doctrine of the Mean*. What should be noted here is that the cultivation of good character in the Confucian sense, i.e., conforming to social norms, is *a way to* self-cultivation in the pursuit of ‘the Way’ which had dominated the minds of Koreans for a long time. Thus the Confucian education is said to consist of two stages: character-building through *the Elementary Learning*(小學) and self-cultivation through *the Great Learning*(大學). The former is supposed to cultivate the basic Confucian ethic in young students by inculcating into them proper ways of behaving as human beings, and the latter to lead young students to pursue the ultimate meaning of becoming human through scholarly work on the four classical texts.

In the school curriculum in Korea today, the scholarly studies of four classical texts are long gone, while being replaced by modernized humanities curriculum from the West, usually centered on modern academic subjects, i.e., math, science, history or languages. But the idea of good character in the Confucian sense still dominates Korean teachers’ minds when it comes to the cultivation of humanity, whether they may be conscious or not. Even if the modernized humanistic subjects in the school are also supposed to cultivate ‘humanity’ in youngsters, the kind of humanity that is expected to be cultivated here is not in its nature exactly the same kind of humanity in the Confucian sense. For example, Martha Nussbaum claims that the humanities education *in the West* in this globalizing world should aim at educating youngsters as ‘good citizens’ who have, among other capacities, a capacity to care about others, near and distant, with genuine concerns, as well as a capacity for critical thinking to raise a dissenting voice in a given society (2010, pp. 45-46). Although we don’t have to agree with her regarding the educational aim for our youngsters, her view should make us

wonder what could be the purpose of our own humanistic education in the school. My concern here has to do with the fact that the idea of ‘humanity’ in the Confucian sense is often found to be at odd with the idea of humanity to be cultivated by the modernized school curriculum of humanities. This leads us to think that the dominant concept of ‘good character’ in the minds of the most Korean teachers, which is rooted in the notion of ‘the noble man’(君子), may need to be reexamined for a renewed view of ‘the educated’ which can well accommodate, or at least not in conflict with, the humanistic education in the school curriculum in modern Korea.

I will examine in this short paper two key pedagogical features in *the Elementary Learning*, an anthology of selections from the Confucian classical texts, which greatly influenced the way the Koreans oriented education for their children. This is a text edited in 1187 by a well-known Neo-Confucian scholar Chi-Hui from the Song dynasty in China. But his educational influence on the Chosun dynasty of pre-modern Korea was so vast, pervasive and lasting that his teaching from *the Elementary Learning* still remains deep inside of everyday moral psychology of most of Korean middle class parents.<sup>1</sup> I think that the pedagogical features presented there are critical in the sense that they have shaped our concept of ‘good character’, which affects especially the early development of personality in the children, yet without necessarily leading into the development of self-cultivation, the ultimate educational purpose of Confucian humanism. In fact, this is exactly what I find the most problematic about the Confucianism-shadowed educational culture in modern Korea. The significance of the Neo-Confucian teaching from *the Elementary Learning* usually lies in its greater attention to ‘the social process’ and how it can contribute to individual self-development. Thus the education of good character through the social process but without being accompanied with self-cultivation can be educationally very dangerous, especially in the modern context. I will show why this is the case by touching upon the key pedagogical features in *the Elementary Learning*: educational emphasis on physical aspects of self-cultivation, namely, person’s comportment, dress and habits of eating and drinking as a way of disciplining oneself and reverencing others; and educational emphasis on human relationship.

Let me first discuss the physical aspects of self-cultivation that mainly appear in the chapter of “The Reverencing the self(敬身)” in *the Elementary Learning*. The Neo-Confucian scholar Chu Hui created this text for the purpose of fostering specific and concrete modes of behavior that are both practical and ritualistic. It includes very trivial acts of our everyday life from sweeping and sprinkling, to learning how to converse with the elderly and relating affectively with people around us as young people. Young people are expected to love parents, respect the elderly, and esteem teachers. The mastery of all these physical appearances and behaviors prepare us to advance to the next level, that is, the pursuit of the goal of *the Great Learning*: cultivating the self, regulating the family, ruling the country, and finally establishing one’s peace of mind in the world. The distinctiveness of this educational approach is to make young people adopt the specific codes of behaviors, i.e., the way they carry themselves, their facial expression, and even the tone of one’s voice, just exactly the way the text instructs us to do up to the level of their becoming part of our unconscious self. This means that we are supposed to make them part of our habit without raising any questions. Let me quote some texts from the chapter of “The

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<sup>1</sup> This text was an important part of the Neo-Confucian core curriculum which was taught in official educational institutes in Korea from the early Chosun dynasty until the rule of the Japanese colonialism in Korea in 1900’s. But the educational philosophy and spirit underlying the text is still with us in our everyday moral psychology and school culture, even if it has been rapidly submerging for the last few of decades.

Reverencing the self(敬身)” to see how specific the instructions are in *the Elementary Learning*:

Do not listen with the head inclined on one side, nor answer with a loud, sharp voice, nor look with a dissolute leer, nor keep the body in a slouching position. Do not saunter about with a haughty gait, nor stand with one foot raised. Do not sit with your knees wide apart, nor sleep on your face (李基奭, 1999, p. 135; 3:2:2, trans.)

When he was in the carriage, he did not turn his head quite round, he did not talk hastily, he did not point with his hands (李基奭, 1999, p. 140; 3:2:7, trans.)

I think this level of specificity in instructing young people’s behaviors is based on a certain educational assumption, i.e., a strong connection between the orientation of physical body and moral character; the former is the mirror of the latter. There seems to be assumed beliefs that a person’s posture and carriage would both reveal his (or her) character and influence it and that behavioral prescriptions and role models most powerfully and effectively inform one’s character. This is why it is extremely important in the Confucian education for young people to learn how to *unconditionally* accord their bodily orientations and behaviors to the specific prescriptions of conducts instructed by the text without reflecting or raising questions on the norms of the behavioral codes. It will form their character by way of shaping their moral psychology, i.e., orienting their every little emotions and attitudes in their everyday life in accordance to a set of Confucian norms. On this first stage of teaching, evoking action is more important than reflection.

But how convincing is the educational assumption on the strong connection between the orientation of physical body and moral character? It may not be as convincing as we think it would be, at least for two reasons, First, it is *empirically* possible to conform to the prescribed behavioral norms and rituals without the expected moral psychology accompanied. We can *pretend* to conform to them. In fact, most of us who have not reached the level of “the noble man” in the Confucian sense can be said not to be fully free from this pretension since only “the noble man” can succeed in finding “the Way” in the sense that his every little act in the everyday life *naturally* goes along with the heaven’s Way without any involuntary wills on his part. Second, it is *logically* possible to conceive another set of behavioral norms and rituals the commitment to which can lead young people into the individual self-cultivation, or perfection of one’s character, as the ultimate purpose of the Confucian education. In other words, specific codes of behavioral norms and rituals prescribed by the text can be said to be arbitrary in connection to the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation.

Thus, in following the Confucian teaching that the early conformation to the Confucian norms in young people’s behaviors and bodily orientations is *educationally* required to *achieve* the Confucian moral perfection of self-cultivation, there is a chance for the danger of merely *taming* them into a set of moral norms and thereby into a certain social order, without really cultivating moral character which can be developed into the moral ideal of self-perfection. The conformation may turn out to be nothing to do with the educational ideal of moral perfection in “the noble man”; it may sometimes even prevent young people from seeking the moral ideal at all by making them self-oppressive rather than self-reflective or self-critical. Here is the place where we as educators in Korea need to ask ourselves why we still take ‘good

character' in the Confucian sense seriously as central to the view of the educated. Is it because we still honestly believe in the Confucian teaching in *the Elementary Learning*, i.e., that forming good character is a way to becoming 'a noble man' of moral perfection? If that is the case, we may need to ask whether the idea of 'a noble man' is still a valid concept of the educated for today in modern Korea. If the answer is yes here, we should further ask how the virtues of 'the noble' man can be made compatible with the virtues of democratic citizens.

Without serious reflection on this sort of questions, teachers' emphasis on physical aspects of self-cultivation in youngsters, i.e., inculcation of young people into specific Confucian codes of behaviors and attitudes in obeying teachers and the elderly, can unjustly discourage their spontaneity in their behaviors and social responses, while limiting the range of actions and responses they can deliberate to choose. On the other hand, Confucianism-minded unreflective teachers are likely to be quick in their judgment on young people's unconventional behaviors which appear to unfit the given norms, considering them to be the token of their ill characters or lack of education. I think that all these can lead into an educationally problematic relationship between teachers and students in which both parties close up their minds to each other, considering the other party to be incomprehensible creatures from a different planet, as we often witness from junior high school classrooms. Thus, the point of my claim is that, even if the educational emphasis on Confucian norms for the cultivation of young people's good character can be said to be educationally valid to some degree in the Korean culture, its strict imposition of a set of specific behavioral codes on young people is to be avoided and taken with pedagogically more reflective approaches.

The second pedagogical feature in the teaching of *the Elementary Learning* is its emphasis on human relationships. This teaching is richly presented in the chapter of "Clarifying the cardinal human relationships"(明倫). According to Chu Hui, "What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is education"(Kelleher, 1989, p. 226). Thus each one of us is supposed to find "the Way" as our own Heaven-endowed nature. We can see here that the fundamental and ultimate purpose of education in Confucianism is *moral* in the sense that it involves the transformation of the person in the process of his finding the Way. According to Kelleher (1989), the moral purpose of Confucian education is related to the realm of human relationship. She holds that there is the basic Confucian belief that "a person fulfills himself in the midst of, not apart from, other human beings" (1989, p. 226), that is, in the relationships. The relationships at stake are particular and hierarchical in their nature and the five cardinal relationships stand out here: parent-child, ruler-minister, husband-wife, elder-younger brother, and friend-friend. Thus education in the Confucians sense is about learning how to carry out the duties appropriate to each relationship, especially for those in the lower half of the relationship, such as child, minister, wife and young brother. As Kelleher points out, throughout the whole text of *the Elementary Learning* the discussion on the theme of human relationship is preponderant; and within that the discussion on the parent-child relationship is dominant (1989, p.227). This is a form of self-cultivation that is in the context of human relationship; we are supposed to reverence and discipline the self out of respect for and gratitude toward our parents, not out of our happiness or self-centered individualistic pursuit. The status of parents in relation to their child is supreme in the Confucian ethic.

Thus, one of the highest virtues in the Neo-Confucianism is filial piety. It requires children's total commitment to their parents. Children are supposed to be on

call from early morning to late at night, ready to respond to any command of their parents. They are taught to dedicate themselves to their parents' every comfort, both physical and psychological. They should try to conform their own likes and dislikes to the parents' even when it comes to choosing their own spouses (1999, 2:1, pp. 35-43). I think this emphasis on parent-child relationship in particular, and human relationship in general, has generated a very unique form of pedagogical communication in the Korean culture: persuasion through heart, not reason. Let me focus my discussion on it in the following.

Parents are sometimes liable to faults and mistakes. Then the child must try to correct them, using, however, only the mildest and most indirect of means. If the parent refuses to change ways, the child must wait and try to correct them again only after his respect and filial piety please them. Even if the parent is not pleased, the child must try to correct them not to let him susceptible of dishonor for the family. If the parent punishes the child for criticizing, the child is not to feel any anger or resentment, even if beaten until blood flows. The child must continue to try to please him with high respect and filial piety (李基奭, 1999, p. 55; 2:1:22, trans.).

Tzu-kung asked about how friend should be treated. The Master said, "Advise them to the best of your ability and guide them properly, but stop when there is no hope of success. Do not ask to be snubbed" (李基奭, 1999, pp. 108-109; 2:5:4, trans.).

Both the passages tell us specific prescriptions about moral dilemmas in human relationship when we consider ourselves to be in a better position for moral judgment on the behaviors of our parent's and friend's. What is common in both cases about the Confucian prescriptions is that we should be careful not to force our judgment on them either by persuasion or by any other means, no matter how ill-directed others' behaviors may be. This instruction may be read to advise us not to violate others' moral autonomy. But the phrase like "do not ask to be snubbed" makes us suspect that the motivation for our carefulness may not be for the sake of the other party's but of our own. But a more accurate answer may be found in the first passage above. The first passage concerns what the child ought to do when the parents have done something wrong. Here it is said that we as children should not give up advising them to correct it even if the parents resist; yet we should not trouble the parents either by directly criticizing them. The approach ought to be mild and indirect with a sense of respect for the parents. But how could it be possibly a solution to the dilemma? What if the parent persists in refusing the child's advice? The prescription seems to anticipate a happy ending: the child's mild approach would in the end touch the parents' hearts, which in turn motivates them to correct their wrongdoings. But what if the anticipation does not come forward? Then, obviously the child is supposed to accept the parents as they are without any hard feelings with them.

What sort of moral virtue are these prescriptions committed to? What exactly are we supposed to achieve in following these prescriptions? As I said earlier, it is hard to say that the prescriptions are intended to give a due respect for others' moral autonomy; they rather seem to be intended to avoid hurting the relationship by putting their top priority on keeping good relationships than on moral rightness. In fact it is well-known that the Confucian ethic is a relationship-oriented ethic. Thus, we should do our best to rectify others' wrong-doings, as far as it remains short of hurting the

relationship with them. The Confucian relationship-oriented ethic seems to presuppose that the justice of the larger society would be better served by harmonious relationships among the members of society, no matter how hierarchical and unjust each relationship may be situated in.

I do not want to deny educationally positive sides of the Confucian emphasis on human relationship shown in *the Elementary Learning*, especially for moral education. The Confucian moral psychology has strength in that it cultivates our attentiveness to others' emotions and intentions with good will, which in turn develops our ability to read others' situations with empathy and sympathy as if they were mine. It also fosters our responsiveness to others' needs and difficulties by way of being attuned to them. This sense of attunement tends to awaken our moral sensibility since it creates a sense of connection with others, which is itself a self-fulfilling and self-extending experience of self-cultivation; we feel connected to something larger than ourselves. This sense may be exactly the kind of humanity that many Korean teachers cherish to cultivate in young people in fostering them to be men of good character.

However, the positive sides of the relationship-oriented ethic may be easily cancelled out if it is not well guided by caring and reflective teachers in educational settings. The cultivation of our attentiveness to each other can easily take a form of *taming*, collective taming to each other's expectations and wishes for psychologically comfort and recognition among ourselves, without much developing our moral sensibility of being connected to something larger than ourselves in pursuit of self-cultivation. This is because educational emphasis on the cultivation of one's responsiveness to others' needs for the sake of good relationship tends to create a sense of guilt in young students when they fail to meet others' needs, especially when the others are their parents or teachers. This sense of guilt put a great psychological burden on young people, which in turn can force them to conform to given norms of expected response and behaviors from parents or society. But the conformation to social norms does not have a moral force in it anymore that it used to have in the traditional Confucian society. For young people conforms to the norms, not out of their sense of moral duty or as a way of self-cultivation, but out of their desire to avoid a sense of guilt or out of fear of not being recognized by others. In other words, without its contribution to young people's self-cultivation, educational emphasis on human relationship in the Confucian ethic can be morally pointless and socially unhealthy.

In conclusion, is the idea of 'good character' in the Confucian sense, i.e., conforming to social norms, in the sense of obeying teachers and the elderly and keeping good relationship with others, still a valid concept of the educated in Korea? The answer would be: yes, *only if* it is cultivated in such a way as to be developed into the pursuit of self-cultivation. Now we should further ask whether the idea of self-cultivation in the Confucian sense or the idea of "the noble man" can be still valid for moral education in Korea. The answer would be: yes, *only if* it can be made compatible with the kind of humanity to be cultivated by the modernized humanistic education. I don't know how the compatibility would be conceptually possible. But this much seems to be clear to me; the conceptual compatibility requires the idea of "the noble man" to be developed in such a way as that "the man" has courage to leave his own personhood open to critical reflection as his way of self-cultivation. In other words, "the noble man" may need to go as far as putting into question the Confucians aim of education as self-cultivation, as his way of self-cultivation.

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