

Symposium for an Asian Link

The Educational ideal of Liang Chih (良知 –“pure knowing”): Its possibilities and limitations

Eun Ju Park, Doctoral student at Seoul National University

I.

Korean schools are suffering from increasing rates of bullying, school violence, suicide, and related problems. Nobody knows what has led to the emergence of this phenomenon. Some diagnose it as resulting from the highly competitive environment that prevails in the Korean school system. Others maintain that it is an inevitable transitional phase from a developing country to an advanced country, from a modern society to a postmodern society, from a traditional Korean school ethos to a western ethos, and so on. Regardless of its diagnosis, Korean schooling has been severely criticized by insiders on account of these problems.

Many critics agree that the current predicament of Korean schools is closely related to, the so-called, ‘cramming teaching method’. Furthermore, they often blame the Confucian tradition for causing Korean schooling to have adopted this cramming style. They describe a typical image of Korean schooling where the teacher teaches from the textbooks and the students listen. They think the Confucian tradition has caused Korean schooling to have a passive bent and a cramming focus.

On the other hand, many outside observers have become impressed and interested by Korean schooling methods. Korean students rank high in various notable international ratings, for example the OECD international ranking for academic achievement in K-12 students. Educators and policymakers in many countries wish to learn about the basis of Korean schools’ success. They often attribute the success of Korean schools to the same Confucian tradition that has been blamed by insiders. Hence, it is time to rethink the Confucian tradition, in relation to Korean schooling.

In this brief paper, I want to introduce the Confucian concept of *liang chih* as an ideal for education. This concept relates to the inextricable relation of the mind and education, because, evidently, we cannot arrive at a clear understanding of the notion of education without also understanding the notion of ‘the mind’, and because these are closely intertwined themes in traditional Confucian thought. Through this brief investigation, I expect to derive some implications for current Korean schooling methods and issues.

This paper has five parts including this introduction. The second part looks at Chu Hsi’s (1130-1200) view of self-cultivation, which has been regarded as a legitimate Neo-Confucian view for the philosophy of Korean education. The third describes Wang Yang-ming’s (1472-1529) view of self cultivation, which is a counter-argument to Chu’s. In the fourth part, I conclude with brief comments about the relationship of education and the mind, which will be drawn out from this paper. This section also includes a look at the issue in the context of two dimensions of education –instruction by the teacher and self-expression by the student, which will in turn lead into some implications for the current Korean schooling system as sketched at the outset of the paper.

II.

In the traditional Confucian textbook ‘*The Great Learning*(*Da Hsue*, attributed

to Confucius and his disciple, Tsengtzu, with later commentary by Chu Hsi)’ is presented a method of Confucian self-cultivation ‘*Ko Wu Chih Chih*’(格物致知 : The Investigation of Things and the Expansion of Knowledge). Chu Hsi added a commentary to this work, relating to the title, as below.

Ko (格) is to “reach”; *wu* (物, thing) is like affair. *Ko wu* is “to reach into the principles of things and affairs.”

- [The Great Learning] (Ivanhoe, 1990, p.81)

Chu Hsi interpreted *ko wu*(格物) to mean “reaching into the principle of things” because he believed that everything shared the same Ultimate Principle[理]. By doing *ko wu*, the individual’s mind can grasp this principle. To Chu Hsi, classical textbooks, traditions and saints are excellent examples that preserved those principles. Endless self-cultivation by *ko wu* enables the individual’s mind to reach the Ultimate Principle, and as a result, to take after the Sages. For Chu, *chih chih*(致知, expansion of knowledge) naturally follows as a result of *ko wu*, becoming the basis of the next phase of *ko wu*. Nevertheless, Chu is concerned with *ko wu* as a primary means of self-cultivation and therefore with a form of *ko wu* that precedes any emergence of *chih chih*.

Chu’s thought has a major position in the Confucian tradition, and has been the source of a strong image of self-cultivation in Confucian education: the teacher teaches classical textbooks and the students listen, or each student tries to read and memorize the textbooks because they are regarded as containing the needed principles in them in an already usable form. In this idea of education, teachers should be highly respected because they know the principles and deliver them to students. This is the typical image of Confucian self cultivation which has shaped the basic understanding of education in Korea.

Wang Yang-ming was born about 300 years after Chu died, in a period of severe moral decay. People read the traditional scriptures day and night, but without understanding or educational benefit. Rising number of corrupt officials belied the benefits of study and traditional texts and practices. This gap between (textual) knowledge and behavior was referred to by Wang as “the separation of the mind and the principle.” This crisis, which, as Wang expressed, was really a crisis in Chu’s approach to self cultivation, can be summarized as follows: External principles cannot change the individual mind because they cannot be sufficiently internalized. Thus, in Wang’s view, Chu’s commentary on ‘*ko wu*’ was severely wrong. This was the main reason why Wang gave a different interpretation of ‘*ko wu chih chih*’ to be discussed in the next section.

III.

(One) *ko* (格, rectifies) *wu*(物, things), as in Mencius’expression, “The great man *Ko* (rectifies) the ruler’s mind. (One) eliminates whatever is incorrect in the mind and maintains the correctness of its original state.[Wang Wen-ch’eng-kung ch’uan-shu, (*Complete works of Wang Wang-ming*)] (Ivanho, 1990, p.82)

Wang offered his own commentary on ‘*ko wu*’ as an alternative to Chu’s. For Wang, *ko wu* does not mean to ‘investigate external principles’; rather it means to “rectify things” by eliminating incorrectness. To eliminate incorrectness, one does not

need to depend on external principles because one can know for oneself what is right and wrong from one's own internal knowledge. What one should do is to strive to act correctly on the basis of one's own knowledge and decisions. How is this to be achieved? We can infer the answer from the expression "original state" in the last part of the passage above. Wang maintained that everybody has *liang chih* as an inborn principle in one's mind, so one does not need to search for principles outside. He compared *liang chih* with the sun. As clouds cover the sun, selfish desires cover *liang chih*. However, the sun reveals itself when the clouds pass by; so too does *liang chih* if only the incorrectness can be eliminated. *Liang chih* is in one's mind from his birth. Wang said that the meaning of '*chih chih*'(致知, to realize a principle) should be understood as '*chih liang chih*'(致良知, to realize good knowledge). As soon as one discovers one's nascent *liang chih* inherent in oneself, one can rectify the incorrectness of one's mind, things or affairs by employing this "good knowledge". In some sense, this is to recover one's original state of mind.

In Wang's view, Chu's most severe fault is related to his understanding of the division between the mind and the principle. Taking Chu's stance implies that one's mind cannot be naturally touched by external principles; it also implies a view of the mind as passive and empty that has to be controlled by external principles. Wang tried to unify the mind and the principle into his concept of '*liang chih*': it brings us all kinds of unification, for instance, between the mind and the principle, knowledge and practice, even the individual and the universe. There is thus a sharp divergence on the method of self-cultivation between Chu and Wang. According to Chu, *ko wu* precedes *chih chih*, but according to Wang, just the reverse. This sharp divergence derives from their different concepts of the mind. For Chu, the mind would be developed by receiving time-tested standard knowledge through *ko wu*. On the contrary, Wang asserted that the mind is the principle itself, a thing to be discovered, not to be developed. Wang regards *liang chih* as the principle itself, not a means of acquiring the principle. Accordingly, Wang focused on *chih chih* as the crucial element in the process of self cultivation. In Wang's view, '*chih chih*' precedes *ko wu*. I think this can be read as relating to the two dimensions of education, as I will explore in the next part.

IV.

Education consists of two dimensions. On the one hand, education occurs as a process of "putting something into" one's mind. In this sense, teachers, books, traditions, and culture impart knowledge to the mind. By accepting this information, a human moves from mere potentiality to a developed human mind. This is Chu's point: from *ko wu* to *chih chih*. I would call it dimension one.

On the other hand, education also occurs as one engages in "expressing oneself out". To express oneself, one should listen to the inner voice deep down in one's own mind. Sometimes this tells one to decide what one really wants, by reference not to an outside standard, but to one's own standard to free oneself from external fetters. In some sense, it means to recover one's true self. Wang's goal is to point out the individual's freedom of choice and action: from *chih chih* to *ko wu*. I would call it dimension two.

Traditionally, Korean schools have focused on dimension one. The teacher teaches from the textbooks and the students listen to (and accept) it. In this dimension, the standard to be received is distinct from the individual mind but students respect the standard and are eager to receive it. Although this approach brought Korean

education successful fruits, it has weak points, too. Even though students are expected to listen to and obey their teachers, parents, traditions, and cultures, they tend to just close their minds and sleep if the knowledge they obtain does not touch their minds and speak to them. When the standard outside does not touch the mind, it is easy for them to take an instrumental approach to it, pursuing one end or another to make use of it. Even though students may study hard, it is only to enter a better school, or to get a better job, not because it is meaningful to them. Further, the focus on dimension one has the danger of making students be merely passive receivers of the standard. This approach is thus partly responsible for making Korean students so passive and silent in the classroom learning.

This is the point where people is to gravitate toward dimension two as an alternative in the educational orientation. The focus on dimension two implies that the individual mind should be respected in the educational interaction between teachers and students. Furthermore, it includes rather a bold assertion that the individual should be taken as his or her own standard and that he or she should be the one who judge on whether the knowledge he or she gains from outside is good or useful for himself or herself on the basis of his or he own internal knowledge of what is right and wrong. The individual is no longer a passive receiver of external standards, but an active agent of judging them. This attempts to unify the mind and external principles. Wang considered *liang chih* to refer to this original self of the mind. This understanding shows the possibility of *liang chih* as educational ideal in today's educational system.

Korean schools have largely ignored dimension two. Korean educators have not focused much on helping their students discover their true selves or express their own thought. The students are instead forced to study harder to meet the expectations of their parents, school or society and became accustomed to burying their own judgments under these external expectations. This has led to many of the current problems in the Korean education system.

However, crucial to remember in this regard is that education should consist of the interaction between two dimensions, as outlined above. When we emphasize one dimension to the disadvantage of the other, it would lead the education into a disaster. What Wang witnessed in his times was the elimination of dimension two where the mind and the principle were separated. However, Wang's concept of *liang chih* as an educational ideal also has fatal weaknesses if it is separated from dimension one. Historically, Wang's radical followers came to insist that even selfish desires should be recognized as constituting a legitimate principle. This self-contradictory argument drove them into corruption, and as a result, they faded into history.

A final interesting point is that the two dimensions of education also appear in the meaning of the Korean word, ‘education’(教育, *kyo-yuk*). *Kyo*(教) signifies “to teach” that represents dimension one, while *yuk*(育) signifies “to nurture” that is clearly related to dimension two. Thus, even this simple word guides us etymologically into the wisdom of precedent generations, which is equally simple but also easy to forget: in education, both dimensions should be respected. Only in that case is the mind to be preserved from both absence and corruption of the standard.

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