

## Attitudes toward Education in Ancient Chinese Philosophies

Some of the most notable Chinese thought systems, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, all promoted varying and distinct perspectives on the world. Confucius, who lived around 551 BCE (Ebrey 42), believed that the primary essence of Confucianism revolves around humanism, the belief that our priorities are to better our nature as human beings to ultimately become a morally 'superior man.' Taoism requires that we follow nature and allow the natural order of life and the universe to determine our actions. Legalism, contrary to Taoism, demands that strict laws and order are followed and emphasizes the importance of the state rather than the individual. The philosophies mentioned vary widely on their general beliefs and outlooks on society, the world, and beyond. Justly so, their views towards education also present stark differences. While all three thought systems differ drastically in their beliefs towards education, with Confucianism prioritizing education, Taoism emphasizing the importance of 'doing' to learn, and Legalism rejecting formal education altogether, the fundamental values that the individual philosophies promote ultimately drive their beliefs.

In Confucius' eyes, the ideal state of humans is to achieve the status of being a 'superior man' by cultivating the self. To do so, Confucius believed that actively seeking knowledge and having enthusiasm towards education would develop one's inner benevolence, or *jen* (Coulombis 50). Confucius once said "I am not one who was born with knowledge; I love ancient [teaching] and earnestly seek it" (*Analects* 7:19, Chan 32), and even referred to the value of learning in the very first Analect: "Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practice from time to time what has been learned?" (*Analects* 1:1, Chan 18) Confucius believed that we should not learn only to better understand the world, but also for the sake of learning itself. Confucius

valued education for the betterment of our benevolent nature, but also to appreciate knowledge as a whole.

Aligning with the central humanistic element of his philosophy, Confucius believed that all humans should have access to knowledge and have equal opportunity to become a 'superior man.' Believing such, Confucius "sought to inaugurate private education, to open the door of education to all, to offer education for training character instead of for vocation." (Chan 17) Though he thought that most traditional subjects were important, it was far more valuable for him to teach good character to help nurture our inner goodness. Confucius said: "There has never been anyone who came with as little a present as dried meat (for tuition) that I have refused to teach him something." (*Analects 7:7*, Chan 31) This belief stems from the humanism of Confucius thought, specifically the virtuous word *ren*, that entails the concern for others that makes moral actions effortless, and is a quality that is held by all individuals (Ebrey 43). By enabling as many people to educate themselves as possible, Confucius not only wished to better individuals morally, but to better society, illustrating the humanistic priority of his philosophy.

Some positives that might result from Confucian attitudes towards education would be the empathy gained from learning about humanity. In understanding more about humanity, we understand more about our place in the world and the importance of moral behavior and righteousness. A second positive is that learning from history allows us to foresee things about the present and the future that we may have otherwise overlooked. A final positive would be the ability to think beyond average thought and to be curious about the world. This is important because without curiosity, we may never discover new things about ourselves or the world.

A negative of Confucian beliefs on education might be the view that only those who are willing to learn have the potential to become 'superior men.' Confucius said "I do not enlighten

those who are not eager to learn, nor arouse those who are not anxious to give an explanation themselves.” (*Analects* 7:8, Chan 31) He emphasized that the willingness to learn is as important as the knowledge gained, so by categorizing people based on their interest in learning, he is creating almost an intellectual hierarchy. Another negative is that Confucius believed women held less political power than men and therefore their education was not as prioritized. Having a bias against these groups of people seems counterproductive to Confucius’ goal of creating a more educated society: it is fundamental that people from all walks of life have access to knowledge to morally better themselves.

The Taoist belief is to live a simple life, with minimal interference to the natural order of the universe. *Wu-wei*, or *non-action*, is generally associated with the image of the “Uncarved Block.” It is a symbol in Taoism that promotes the idea of leaving things in their natural state. In Benjamin Hoff’s *Tao of Pooh*, a book using Winnie the Pooh and his friends as metaphors for aspects of Taoism, he states that “Pooh can’t describe the Uncarved Block to us in words; he just *is* it. *That’s* the nature of the Uncarved Block.” (Hoff 19) The meaning behind this is that the essence of life and our natural path is already within us. Taoists believe that refraining from a formal education preserves the natural state of our being. In *The Lao Zi*, a text written by Lao Zi, purported to be a well known Taoist practitioner, he said “The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of Tao is to decrease day after day [...] until one reaches the point of taking no action.” (*Lao Tzu* 48., ch. 7, Chan 162) Rather than actively working towards educating oneself, as with Confucianism, Taoism promotes the idea that we must instead, simplify our life so that we may learn through letting our instinctive actions, and those of people around us, form our experiences and therefore, our knowledge.

Taoism is far less rational than Confucianism and even contradicts some of its philosophies on the basis that we should emphasize living practically instead of learning through books. Indeed, Lao Zi said “Abandon learning and there will be no sorrow.” (*Lao Tzu* 20., ch. 7, Chan 149) Lao Zi presents the idea that education is almost insignificant, that life moves on without it. It is not a necessity that we have formal education, and that we would benefit more from living and experiencing instead. Furthermore, “it is very hard to find any of the *spirit* of Taoism in the lifeless writings.” (Hoff 26) Without living and breathing the Taoist lifestyle, one isn’t properly learning what it means to harness “the Way” within. It is one thing to read about knowledge, but another to experience it, and this is what Taoism wishes to encourage.

There are several benefits to living and learning through Taoist methods. Abandoning the ego and living a more simplistic life can help us learn not only about the way the systems of nature interact, but also learn more about ourselves and our thoughts. Zhuang Zi, another Taoist philosopher, believed that “The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror [...] It responds to things but conceals nothing of its own. Therefore it is able to deal with things without injury to [its reality].” (*Chuang Tzu*, ch. 8, Chan 207) The state of calm that one can attain as a result of practicing Taoism is certainly another benefit of learning practically. Learning about the natural state of any given action or circumstance can also greatly influence our outlook on success, failure, and life in general.

While there are several benefits of educating oneself through Taoism, there are also some negatives that should be considered. Not knowing about other subjects leaves us oblivious about macro issues concerning society. It is said that “In one parable [Zhuang Zi] had a wheelwright insolently tell a duke that books were useless since all they contained were the dregs of men long gone.” (Ebrey 49) Though it is important to cultivate the self, it is also important to know about

the past and how the knowledge gained from those events can help inform the present. To a certain extent, to gain knowledge solely from our own lives is to be ignorant towards the history and people of the past, who experienced things and gained knowledge that we could benefit from today.

Legalists disapprove, for the most part, of education and often went to great extremes to eliminate things associated with literacy. People often refer to Legalism as the “antithesis of Confucian thinking” (de Bary 198), one reason for which is the Legalists’ prominently negative attitude towards education. Li Si, the Prime Minister and advisor to the Emperor of the Qin Dynasty who practiced Legalism, advised the First Emperor to go through with one of his most infamous acts: The Burning of the Books. This event took place in 213 BCE and was targeted at influential pieces of literature, including some of Confucius’ classics, in an attempt to prevent opposition to the emperor (de Bary 209). Around 460 scholars were executed in 212 BCE, as well, as punishment for their studies. Interestingly though, there were some exceptions to the types of literature that were burned including books on medicine, divination, and agriculture, as it was believed that the knowledge held in these books would help benefit the state as a whole, which was generally valued more than the welfare of the individual (de Bary 209).

Legalism shuns education on the basis that the knowledge gained will undermine the established system. It was believed that knowledge supplied from sources other than the government might influence people to rebel. Han Feizi, another influential Legalist, wrote that “Inevitably armies become weak and the government becomes disorderly” as a result of scholarly advances, and the reason “is that what the people praise and what the ruler respects are those techniques that bring disorder to the state.” (*The Han Feizi*, ch. 12, Chan 259-60) In this paragraph, Han Feizi discusses the potential harm that scholars would have if they were in

positions of power. Because the educated look to the past for guidance, Han Feizi believes that their sanctimonious attitude clouds their vision on what would be right for the state. One of the main priorities of the Legalist system was the order and law enforced by the government and military. It is not surprising then to consider how much of a threat scholars and other literati were to Legalists, who assumed that the knowledge people would gain from education would lead to the questioning of their emperor and his governing system. This value that Legalists hold is influenced by the context of the time. As Legalism was widely practiced during the Warring States time, we can assume that the state interests and concerns were valued more than the individual's moral or intellectual well-being. This is another reason to explain the harsh disdain of intellectual freedom shown by Legalists.

One of the benefits of Legalist attitudes towards education is that there is an ordered system with a set standard of knowledge that citizens should have. This set standard creates a culture of semi-equal knowledge amongst all. If education was more accessible, the intellect of a person would be judged, and those deemed more educated would be given certain leverage and treated with positive biases, allowing them access to more opportunities, which would revoke the somewhat equal society that Legalism espouses. Another benefit, specifically to those in power, is that citizens having devout loyalty to the state, and not questioning the intentions of the government due to a lack of knowledge, would certainly be an advantage to the Emperor. It would also maintain peace as there is nothing for citizens to refute if all knowledge supplied has been approved by the government.

The refusal of Legalists to learn from the past can be considered both a pro and a con. In *The Han Feizi*, the story of the rabbit catcher is recounted: there is a farmer with a stump in his field. One day a rabbit comes along and crashes into the stump and dies. For the next few days,

the farmer waits by the stump hoping to catch more rabbits the same way, but he doesn't and is ridiculed by the rest of the village. The story essentially outlines that repeating actions of the past is naïve. Han Feizi believed that "Those who think they can take the ways of ancient kings and use them to govern the people of today all belong in the category of stump-watchers." (*The Han Feizi*, ch. 49, de Bary 199) While it is true that situations vary, and we cannot copy all actions done in the past to fix the problems of today, it is important to recall events to see the causes and consequences and how we can apply them to today. By denying people access to education, Legalism causes general critical thinking and problem-solving skills to decrease, and generally diminishes a culture of curiosity about the world that can only be attributed to works of literature.

To conclude, each philosophy's attitude towards education is fueled by the philosophy's foundational values. Confucianism requires that we achieve the status of being a 'superior man' through education, Taoism encourages that we live in the present and learn through experiencing things, and finally Legalism objects to formal education on the basis that it might revoke the established system. All three perspectives on education have advantages and disadvantages, none more valid than the others. A society comprised of elements from each philosophy would nurture the ideal environment for learning, and ensure moral and intellectual betterment for all.

### **Works Cited**

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