# Chinese learning styles: Blending Confucian and Western theories

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ABSTRACT

The multitude of philosophies that currently exists in workforce education in China makes it difficult to decide on a singular theoretical foundation. Therefore, it seems most prudent to begin with those theories that align with Confucian values as well as include humanistic, pragmatist, behaviorist, and other elements. Such a theoretical base, even though it is clearly Western in origin, can still serve as a launching pad for Chinese scholars.

Keywords: Confucian, learning theories, behaviorism, liberalism, connectivism
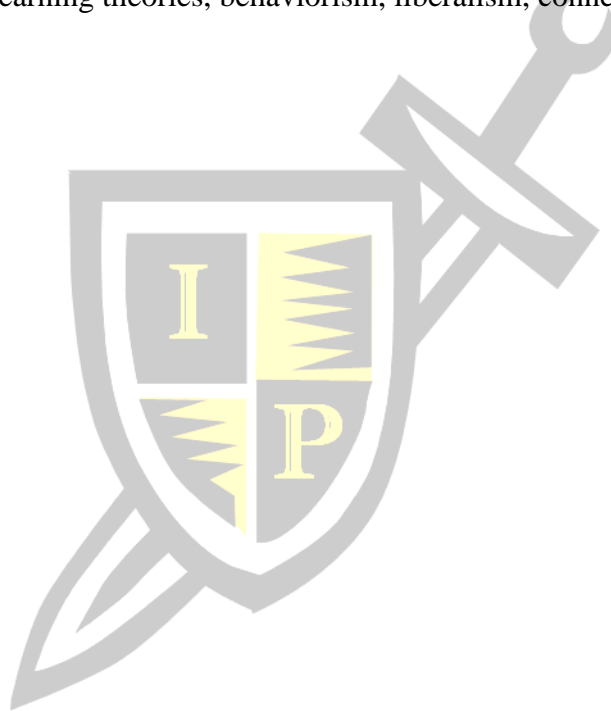
INTRODUCTION

Considering China's rapid industrialization and modernization over the past two decades, an emerging issue is how China can meet labor force requirements necessary to keep its economy growing at a rapid clip.   Vocational education in China has been studied extensively (Guo and Lamb, 2010; Wang, 2005, 2009a; Wu and Ye, 2010), but there is a dearth of research regarding any underlying philosophies guiding this education. (Wang, 2005). Elias and Merriam (2005), however, assert that philosophical underpinnings inform educational decision making. "The point of philosophical inquiry is to clarify issues so that decisions can be made on proper grounds. … When considering the interrelationship of philosophy and activity, it is clear that philosophy inspires one's activities, and gives direction to practice" (pp. 4-5).

PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Lin (2012) wrote that China would find itself disadvantaged if it simply borrowed from the West, and he called upon Chinese scholars to develop their own learning theories. Considering cultural characteristics in China, the author feels that the theories often considered foundational to American learning styles may not be appropriate for China, and attempts should be made to develop indigenous Chinese learning theories.

What follows is a highlight of workforce education philosophies in China and a review of the influence of 2,000 years of Confucianism on Chinese culture and education. They will describe the repeated borrowing of educational philosophies from Western sources, the alignment of those philosophies with Confucian values, and their suitability for the current social and economic situation in China. Finally, they will present their choices of theories as a starting point for Chinese learning theory development.

THE AIMS, SUBSTANCE, AND METHODS OF THE TEACHING OF CONFUCIUS

In *The Analects*, Confucius divided the aims of teaching into individual and social aims, each of which were further subdivided as follows according to Chen (1990, pp. 173-174):

1. Individual aim
    a. Subjective aim
    b. Objective aim ("to give peace to others")
2. Social aim
    a. First stage of ideal society ("small tranquility")
    b. Second and highest stage of ideal society ("great harmony")

The substance of the teaching according to the disciples of Confucius is equally subdivided into categories (Chen, 1990, pp. 243-246):

1. Moral Teaching
2. Intellectual Teaching
3. Religious Teaching

The methods of teaching can be divided as follows (Chen, 1990, pp. 377-379):

1. Democratic Method
2. Modern Principles of Teaching Methods
3. Methods of Learning
   a. Men are teachable
   b. Five steps of learning – study, inquiry, thinking, discrimination, and earnest practice.
   c. Two essentials of learning – diligence and humility

Workforce education was insignificant in the Confucian context. There was a social stigma against the vocational trades. Such skills were passed down within families. Formal education outside the home was for those of higher social standing (Gewurtz, 1978). Reagan (2005) acknowledged this Confucian bias against manual labor, but he also noted social advancement for the working classes was not unheard of.

What does this subdivision of Confucian educational philosophy ultimately show? Confucius put strong emphasis on moral education, including proper conduct in daily life and honoring one's parents. Social harmony is paramount—people have relationship duties to others and are expected to show loyalty toward society, social class, and family. Others' needs supersede individual needs, and there is an obligation to treat others in a humane manner. Since people are eminently teachable, they should always seek knowledge and study to become a better person and can learn self-control, virtue, and consistently ethical behavior through personal and communal efforts.

CHINESE CULTURAL VALUES AND VARIABLES

Chen (1990) saw Confucius as both the creator and the preserving force of Chinese civilization, indicating that Confucius still has a major impact on contemporary cultural values and variables. Elashmawi (2001) described the Chinese as submissive to authority and most comfortable in hierarchical social and professional structures. According to Marquardt, Berger, and Loan (2004), the Chinese crave structured, orderly lives and strict adherence to rules, regulations, and procedures among colleagues or business partners. They are very conscious of their or others' status in a hierarchy, like to know everyone's clear roles and responsibility, and show an appreciation for capability, seniority, and knowledge. Communication, as a result, tends to be formal, with emphasis on etiquette, use of proper channels, and ritualistic exchanges. Bad news, for example, is often communicated indirectly through third persons or intermediaries to avoid conflict and allow others to save face. These values reflect, among others, the Confucian aims of carefulness and earnestness in action, sincerity, and a need to know.

Humility, trust and honesty, openness, and doing things meticulously and carefully as required by Confucius are highly valued. Foreign partners must maintain their credibility at all times by being well-prepared, having all needed information, and being able to answer questions satisfactorily. They must use logic, focus on causes and effects, analyze relationships, have patience, and explain the pros and cons of various options (Elashmawi, 2001). Communication tends to be instrumental, with a focus on the issue while exhibiting personal control (Marquardt, Berger, & Loan, 2004). This manner of doing business corresponds once again to Confucius's rule of sincerity, carefulness of speech, and earnestness in action and his requirement to perform everything with diligence.

Among the collectivistic Chinese there is a great need for consensual decision-making and obtaining approval. Group membership is more important than individuality, and group members are supposed to subordinate their needs to those of the group by promoting group values, facilitating group communication, and demonstrating group loyalty. Communication is high context, with many things understood without being explicitly stated. Therefore, new information is filtered through the subjective group perspective rather than based on objective facts alone (Marquardt, Berger, & Loan, 2004). Confucian values of sociability, filial piety, and proper conduct are reflected here.

Surface harmony is important. There should be no public unpleasantness or embarrassment so that people can maintain their status even in the face of bad news and no upsetting or changing the social order or work hierarchies. The Chinese are comfortable with the way things are. As Confucius stated, carefulness in speech and proper conduct are of utmost importance. Despite the need for consensus, however, the hierarchical structure and the need to preserve status also require that once the leader makes a decision, it is final (Elashmawi, 2001; Marquardt, Berger, & Loan, 2004).

In China, much business is done by way of guanxi, personalized networks of influence. It is important to have proper connections and to be properly introduced into new relationships. However, guanxi is a network of mutual favors; visitors to China must reciprocate all efforts made by their Chinese hosts (Elashmawi, 2001). Guanxi obligations may exist toward friends, relatives, neighbors, or colleagues and are crucial in life: "Conversations with people with whom you have no guanxi 'connections' can be very frustrating. You will be met with a stream of negatives … or some dismissive phrase. Or you will simply be ignored. There does not seem to be much you can do about such responses" (Kane, 2006, p. 157). Therefore, it is important to establish guanxi by looking for any connections with Chinese counterparts and by pointing to possible mutual future benefits (Morrison, Conaway, & Borden, 1994).

CHINESE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY BORROWING SINCE 1900

In 1901 the Qing government started a national educational system modeled after the ideals of German educator J.F. Herbart and also from Japan (Wu 1991; Zhou 2005). Herbart believed that education should match the interests of students, that's one personalityEducation according to Herbart should be varied, build upon the interests of students, and seek mathematical precision to achieve development of moral character. Herbart believed, as did Confucius, that education should properly align one's vocational interests with personality (Cole, 1907). Gewurtz (1978) believed that this vocational orientation would better support the rapid industrialization of China.

The problem with Herbart was that the emphasis remained on character and morals development, perpetuating Confucianism. Idealism appealed to educational authorities, as it left in place old methods while taking a new stance on workforce education. Therefore, Herbartian ideas were overlaid a Confucian framework. Vocational education and industrial requirements continued to be subordinate to character education. An acute shortage of skilled workers continued.

Huang Yanpei (1915, cited in China Vocational Education Association, 1985) was convinced that besides providing individuals with workplace skills, there needed to be more focus on learning for learning's sake, as well as citizenship development. Huang especially stressed helpfulness, reliability, and hard work. Vocational education was seen as a means to best

serve society, as well as for individuals to find their true calling. After only a few years of pragmatism's influence, the Guomindang denounced it as imperialist and a threat to Chinese culture, forcing educational pragmatism into a steady decline (Zhou, 2005).

When the communists assumed power in China in 1949, the pragmatist idea of students as independent learners was a threat to the determinist dialectical and historical materialism. What was good for the greater society trumped individual aspirations. The communists endorsed some aspects of Confucianism while repudiating others such as attention to individual development (Pan, 2007). Taking his cues from Lenin's unity of theory and practice, Mao decreed that every student was to participate in industrial production labor for the greater good of society (Orleans, 1961).

After Mao's death in 1976, traditional and Western philosophies were utilized to varying degrees over the next two decades. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Confucian traditions ushered in liberalism's return to Chinese education (Wang, 2005). The notion of teachers as authority figures led many teachers to adopt a liberal perspective.

In the late 1970s, behaviorism was embraced as the new vocational education philosophy (Wang, 2005; Wu and Ye, 2010). China's fast economic development necessitated skill training and competency development. Curricula had to be formula-driven to assure that needed skills for work were taught. The Marxist focus on results assured that behavioral objectives were oriented to local needed (Wu and Ye, 2010). Learning the right skill set, with its accompanying behavior expectation, was paramount to achieving development goals.

According to Wang (2009a), China was now at a decision point. The Marxist system focused on politics, class struggle, and productivity; the traditional system favored moral education; while the behaviorists focused mainly on technical skills. How could China transform into a modern economy while holding fast to Chinese culture? Should Western educational ideas simply be borrowed and adopted as needed, or should traditional Chinese thought be maintained?

Two solutions to these issues have emerged. In addition to the focus on specific skills, Wu and Ye (2010) also mentioned a need for student-centered teaching, a teacher role that exerted less control, and critical thinking abilities among the students, which is clearly a resurgence of pragmatism. Wu and Ye labeled their vision of instructional design "integrated teaching" (p. 149), but they really advocated pragmatist and progressivist ideas such as individual development, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Stephens (2009) noted that pragmatism shares many virtues with Confucianism. Both focus on the improvement of social conditions and seek to influence personal experiences so that self-actualization is more likely. Such citizens are better equipped to advance society. Pragmatism's similarities with traditional philosophy make it an excellent choice for a Chinese educational transition that can help society move forward by affecting all its members without leading to social upheaval.

Wu and Ye (2010) had noble aspirations, noting that vocational education must focus more on human dignity, individual personalities, and a higher consciousness. Wang (2009a) identified the humanistic tendency in students' determining their own learning: "Trainees need a learner-centered approach in which they become responsible for their own learning" (p. 168). These ideas are once again connected with Confucian thought, which also allows for an individual focus in educational pursuits.

Wang (2009b) described the contemporary situation with the following quotation: "Despite multiple traditions, Chinese VTE does not appear to reflect a dominant philosophy" (p. 177). Far from being dismayed by this multitude of influences and the apparent lack of focus in workforce education philosophy, he celebrates it. Wang claimed that Chinese education has been

influenced by Confucianism, Marxism, Maoism, Leninism, liberalism, progressivism, and behaviorism and also uses elements of radicalism and humanism. Educational borrowing is acceptable as long as differing social environments are taken into account and the Chinese context, i.e., a focus on what is best for society, is preserved. Nobody, however, should have one dominant philosophy forced upon them.

LEARNING THEORIES—A PROPOSAL

The learning theories discussed below are to be understood as simply a proposal. They are not intended to be the only or best answer but rather the stepping stone for a discussion about what may be effective for Chinese learners and how Chinese scholars may build indigenous learning theories on a basis that, although admittedly Western, attempts to take Chinese cultural values and variables into account. See the appendix for a schematic view of learning philosophies.

LEARNING THEORY COMPONENT

Learning theories try to explain how information is received, processed, and remembered. They investigate how students' "old" knowledge determines the "new" knowledge they will learn and how this "new knowledge" is processed and organized so that it will be remembered and can be used. Learning theories look at the social context of learning (family, peers, work) to determine how such contexts can support learning activities.

BEHAVIORISM

Behaviorism is based on the notion that educators should focus on modifying human behavior through appropriate external stimuli (conditioning). The role of the teacher is that of an authority figure who maintains control of the learning environment and determines what the students will learn. In that process, s/he tries to modify learner behaviors. Learners are to follow directions, show that they are competent (in a manner prescribed by the instructor), and focus on acquiring the skills that are offered. Learning environments emphasize outcomes and competencies; teaching will be to the test. All learning will be measurable or observable in terms of performance (Elias & Merriam, 2005).

As discussed by Wu and Ye (2010), behaviorist methods were common during the early post-Mao years to create trained workers for the Chinese manufacturing industry. As long as the manufacturing component remains a strong part of the Chinese economy, chances are that behaviorist training for factory workers and machine operators will remain commonplace since these methods are often used to train workers in manufacturing skills. The fact that Confucius' moral aims and social regulations emphasize obedience to people higher up in a hierarchy supports the use of behaviorism in workplace training.

LIBERALISM

Classical liberalism focuses on an academic or liberal arts approach organized around great ideas of Western or European culture and knowledge. Technical skills are less important. The goal is to develop the intellectual powers of the mind. The teacher is the expert, the authority

in the classroom who dispenses knowledge and has all the answers. Learners are the proverbial "empty vessel" and are supposed to acquire, absorb, and store facts and knowledge. The aim is to turn students into lifelong learners on a quest to acquire wisdom and the values of freedom (Elias & Merriam, 2005).

Much of what liberalism stands for is also present in the ideas of Confucius. He supported personal development toward wisdom, respect for authority, and constant personal improvement while showing satisfaction with one's existence. Hence, he favored learning about poetry, history, music, and social relations over learning any workplace skills. Much teaching in China today is still conducted in lecture form, with the teacher as the expert and the student silent "sponges" soaking up the knowledge dispensed and showing a preference for rote learning and regurgitating facts (Wang, personal communication, June 2013). Anyone developing a training program will have to keep these preferences of Chinese learners in mind. Instructors who do not act authoritatively or try to create interactive learning experiences with strong learner participation might quickly find themselves frustrated or less respected. Other teaching methods may eventually become more common in China, but at this point, lecture and rote learning still predominate.

CONNECTIVISM

Connectivism as a learning theory is often discussed in terms of informal online learning. The basic idea of connectivism is that learners take their knowledge and make it part of a community of like-minded individuals. Learning happens when learners become part of a network, retrieve new knowledge and information, integrate new and old knowledge, and then connect to the same or another network to share their knowledge and repeat the cycle. Connectivism can help others determine how learners learn from being imbedded in a variety of networks (Kop & Hill, 2008).
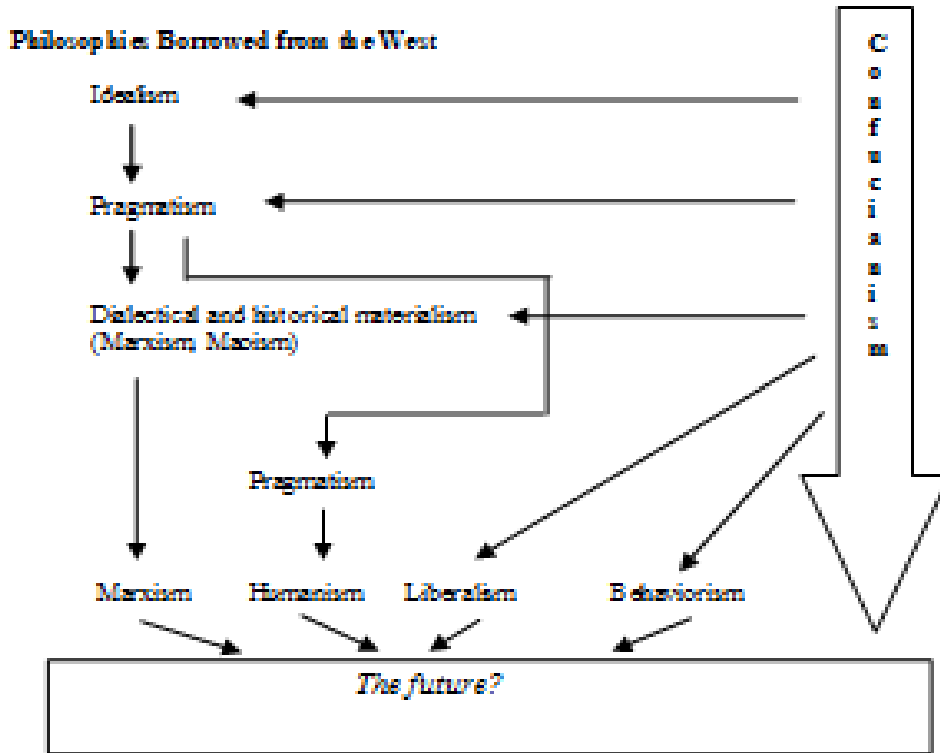
The collectivistic Chinese are integrated into multiple networks of family, friends, neighborhoods, colleagues, etc. These networks, in the Confucian tradition of primacy of social regulations and proper conduct toward others in combination with a respect for authority; the extensive use of guanxi; and the need to preserve harmony in one's collectives can strongly influence the way in which information is absorbed and transmitted. Educator can benefit from knowing about learners' network connectedness and the way networks operate in their lives, and they can better gauge which kind of information to present to whom, how that information may be perceived, and consider how network influence may modify the information in learners' minds.

CONCLUSION

The multitude of philosophies that currently exists in workforce education in China makes it difficult to decide on a singular theoretical foundation. Therefore, it seems most prudent to begin with those theories that align with Confucian values as well as include humanistic, pragmatist, behaviorist, and other elements. Such a theoretical base, even though it is clearly Western in origin, can still serve as a launching pad for Chinese scholars. The field must move away from simply borrowing theories to developing its own indigenous models, and the theories presented here are designed as a discussion starter, an attempt to encourage people to

think about how Chinese workforce education can best be developed for future economic growth.

APPENDIX

Philosophies Borrowed from the West

- Idealism
- Pragmatism
- Dialectical and historical materialism (Marxism, Maoism)
- Pragmatism
- Marxism
- Humanism
- Liberalism
- Behaviorism

Confucianism

The future?

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