

## On the Realistic Significance of Confucius' Fair Educational Concept

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**Abstract:** Confucius has been eminent throughout histories in terms of his profound educational concepts. In this paper the author attempts to investigate the contributions Confucius had made in promoting the popularization of education at that time. The ultimate goal of this paper is to demonstrate the realistic significance of Confucius' educational concept, namely, "education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean".

**Key words:** Confucius; educational concept; fair education; realistic significance

### 1. Introduction

Confucius was the earliest as well as one of the most influential educators and thinkers in education history. It was 82 years later after the birth of Confucius that Socrates (469BC-399 BC), the earliest philosopher and educator in ancient Greek, was born. Confucius' educational concepts and ideas, personality, education activities as well as his philosophy not only have made great effects on Chinese intellectuals and educators, but have made tremendous influence on the whole world, in particular some South East Asian countries, such as Japan, Korea, Viet Nam. To no small extent, Confucianism has already become one of the most important culture heritages in the world.

Confucianism, particularly Confucius' educational concepts, have been so influentially affecting the Orient and the whole world since ancient times, it is not only invaluable culture legacy of China, but the whole world's, therefore it has become a must to pass on and develop the ideas of Confucius, which is a national mission by generations and a necessity for survival and development of the whole humankind. As a Noble Prize winner put it in Paris Conference in 1988, "if human beings want to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is indispensable for us to look back to 2500 years ago and to learn from the wisdom of Confucius"<sup>1</sup>. Again as an English scholar, Kess assumed, "Confucianism might be more valuable than western cultures in the process of industrialization and modernization"<sup>2</sup>.

Confucius spent more than 40 years on and devoted all himself to education in a "tireless zeal". Not only had Confucius established the school of Confucianism, but also put forward a set of invaluable education theories and concepts 2500 years ago, such as "education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean", "carrying out teaching strategies in accordance with their aptitude", "combining learning with contemplation", "teaching with skills and patience", "teaching benefits teachers as well as students". Besides these precious education theories and concepts, Confucius' teaching attitude, teaching strategies and the

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<sup>1</sup> Jianhua Zhang.(2001). *Several Pressing Issues Facing to China after Her Entry into WTO*. Economics Daily Press, 1st edition. 520

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

mutually respected and concerned relation between teachers and students endorsed by him have been still highly impressive and have been of great importance today.

Confucius' education concepts are too profound to do a thorough and in-depth research on each one, we might well "excerpt just a tiny part of Confucius' education concept". Given the fast development of the popularization of higher education in China, Confucius' educational concept, i.e. "education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean" has gained more realistic significance in contemporary world.

## 2. The Importance of "Setting up the First Private Schooling" among All the Citizens

Confucius was the first civilian in China to open a private school and accepted all the citizens, no matter they were noble or mean, which indeed changed the old education mechanism at that time, i.e. education was only conducted for slave owners, into a new model that was for all citizens. Thereafter situation that "only nobilities and officials in the governments could receive education" was changed, which had started a path-blazing career in Chinese education history and therefore strengthened the popularization of culture and education at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and promoted the historical evolution from slave society to feudal society in China.

Dated back to Xia Dynasty in the 21st Century BC, school education already started to exist in China, but it was only for "governmental officials" and was "an integration between government and education", therefore only nobilities and slave owners could receive education and slaves were deterred from either receiving any education or going to schools. This education mechanism was not changed until the end of the Spring and Autumn Period when Confucius lived. According to *Mencius (Mengzi-TengWen Princess)*, "those who could receive education only belong to the 'upper' class and common citizens and slaves could only lead a illiterate life."

In the Spring and Autumn Period, working force was enhanced due to the use of ironware, which led to changes in production relations. The slave owners' ruling was declining and the Emperor of *Zhou* could not rule his kingdom very well and his small nations fought among themselves, therefore "many nobilities were degraded into lower casts and education subsequently started to be popularized among all the citizens." Under this circumstance, the previous nobilities-oriented education mechanism was impossible to sustain and common citizens began to claimed for more rights and opportunities of receiving education, so there appeared a phenomenon that civilians started to pass on knowledge among themselves. Nevertheless, Confucius was the first person to open a private school and dedicated to teaching and he himself edited teaching textbooks and teaching materials for his students.

Adapting to the historical trend, the knowledgeable, capable confident and courageous Confucius established the first private school in spite of "tremendous hardships and obstacles" and thereafter "plenty of students came to learn from him from different places", which had indeed paved the way to establish private schooling in a massive scale and changed the tradition that "only governmental officials could receive education" and broke slave owners' monopoly and control over education, knowledge and classical works as well as blazed a new path to popularize education to the cast of "*shuren*" (lower class). After that private schooling started to gain more and more popularity among all citizens and had lasted for more than 2000 years in China and therefore fostered tremendous talents for the next feudal successors.

Confucius had carefully sorted out and edited some ancient regulations and classics for the purpose of

teaching. For example, *Liu Jing*, including 6 sections such as *Poems*, *Calligraphy*, *Rites*, *Music*, *Yi*, *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, became textbooks of 6 courses respectively, which had been widely adopted for quite a long time in the feudal society. Hence Confucius, as the editor of textbooks at that time, had made great contributions to preserving ancient classics, developing and disseminating ancient Chinese culture.

### 3. Implementation of Confucius' Fair Educational Concept

Throughout Confucius' teaching career, he had been carrying out his fair education concept, i.e. "education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean", which could be seen from the following aspects:

According to the *Analects of Confucius*(*Lun Yu-Duke Wei Ling*), Confucius' education concept stressed that there was no discrimination in choosing students and Confucius was willing to teach anyone, regardless of his social standing, as long as they were eager and tireless. According to *Shu Er*, Confucius said, "if a man wanted to learn from me, even though he could not afford to pay the regular tuition fee, but brought a bundle of dried meat instead, I would never refuse to teach him." *Shuxiu* (tuition fee) was gifts that a student presented to a teacher in ancient times and it was a rite to present some gifts if a student wanted to learn from his teacher. Indeed it was very humble gift to present just a bundle of dried meat and then learn from Confucius for one year. However, Confucius cared a lot for this humble gift because it was a symbol for establishing a relation between a teacher and a student.

Based on his fair education concept, Confucius recruited a great range of disciples regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, cast, intelligence quotient, achievement, age, appearance, and wealth. As the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji-Zhongni's Disciples*) and other historical classics indicated that, among Confucius' disciples, there were some originating from upper social cast and some deriving from lower social cast. For example, *Meng Yizi*, *Nangong Shujing*, *Sima Niu* were from upper cast. *Meng Yizi* was the heir of one of the three Super Lords (the family of *Meng Sun*, the family of *Shu Sun*, the family of *Ji Sun*)of the Nation of *Lu*, who, together with his elder brother, learned *Rite* from Confucius abiding by their father's will; And *Yuan Xian*, *Zi Zhang*, *Zhong Gong*, *Ran Yong* were from lower cast. *Ran Yong's* father was even more humble. However Confucius never treated him with contempt, on the contrary, he praised him highly and expressed admiration for *Ran Yong* that "Yong surely could occupy the place of a prince." (*Yong Ye*)

Some of Confucius' disciples were from well-off families and some were not. For example, *Yan Yuan*, *Yan Lu*, *Zeng Ceng*, *Zeng Cang*, *Min Ziqian* were from poor families, in particular for *Yan Yuan* who only "had a handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink and lived in a mean street" (*ibid*); and for *Zi Gong*, who was from a merchant family where "carriages were teamed in lines, horses were raised in crowds, accumulated gold were amounted to thousands of barrels". (*Shiji-Zhongni's Disciples*)

Some of Confucius' disciples were very intelligent and some were not. For example, *Yan Hui* who was an intelligent student "could know *shi* (ten) if he was taught *yi* (one)" (*Xian Jin*). On the contrary, for those less intelligent ones, such as *Gao Chai* and *Zeng Can* (*ibid*) were no discriminated, what's more, *Zeng Can* was one of the top students of Confucius.

Some of Confucius' disciples were from the Nation of *Lu* and some were from the Nation of *Wei*, *Qi*, *Jin*, *Chen*, *Song*, *Wu*, *Chu*, *Qin*; some of Confucius' disciples held *Huaxia* nationality, some held *Manyi* and *Rongdi* nationality, such as *Bu Qi*, *Yanyan*, *Qinzu*. During the Spring and Autumn Period, almost every Nation had their

own writing characters, but Confucius recruited students regardless of their family background, social cast, nationality and ethnicity, which indeed had greatly promoted cultural exchanges among different ethnical groups and strengthened the unification of language and characters among different Nations and had played an active and propelling role in forming the greater China as well as laid a foundation for Emperor *Qin Shihuang's* unifying of different kingdoms.

Some of Confucius' disciples were quite diligent and outstanding and some were not. The most diligent and outstanding student was *Yan Hui*, therefore when Duke *Ai*, the reigning prince of Confucius' native Nation *Lu* asked Confucius "who, among all your disciples, was the one who most loved to learn", Confucius answered, "there was a disciple, *Yan Hui*, who most loved to learn." (*Yong Ye*), on the contrary, *Zai Yu* was a lazy student, "he slept in the daytime, which made Confucius angry and scolded, "a rotten wood could not be carved. A wall built with rubbish could not be painted." (*Gong Yechang*)

Some of Confucius' disciples were senior citizens and some were quite young. The most elderly one was *Yan Yuan's* father, *Yan Lu*, who was only six years younger than Confucius; the youngest one was *Gong Sunlong*, who was fifty-three years younger than Confucius. Taking *Yan Lu* and *Gong Sunlong* as an example, they were both Confucius' students, but had forty-seven years' age gap.

Some of Confucius' disciples were quite good-looking and some were not. For example, *Zeng Zi* ever commented that "how imposing *Zi Zhang's* manner was!" (*Zi Zhang*); however *Dantai Mieming*, *Gao Chai* were "extremely ugly" and "*Gao Chai's* height was no longer than 1.6 meters." (*Shiji-Zhongni's Disciples*)

Based on the aforementioned discussion, Confucius' teaching concept was really fair and all his disciples were treated equally. As the dialogue between *Nanguo Huizi* and *Zi Gong* indicated in *Xun Zi (Xun Zi-Fa Xing)*, "what a diversity of the Master's students!" "The Master was a such a virtuous person, he never refused his students and his students were reluctant to leave him as well, which was like a skillful doctor who always had many patients, that was why the Master's students were in such a diversity!". The dialogue above well demonstrated Confucius' fair education concept.

As Confucius persistently stuck to the aforementioned fair education concept, he had gathered about a group of disciples, according to the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shi Ji-Confucius)* "the number of Confucius' disciples had been greatly exaggerated as many as three thousand and some of them had come from afar" and, "those who, in their own person, became conversant with the Six Disciplines taught by Confucius, numbered seventy-two." some of Confucius' disciples were eminently virtuous, some were good at political matters, some were capable of eloquence, some were competent in literature, therefore Confucius had aggregated the most talented persons at the time.

#### 4. Conclusion

The theoretical paradigm of Confucius' education concept was "by nature, all men were nearly alike when their lives began. When they were growing, they became different from each other because of what they practised" (*Yang Huo*). So the reason why people differed from each other largely originated from education and postnatal acquisition of knowledge, therefore education shall be no differentiation among different people. In this sense, it might be argued that Confucius' educational concept was democracy-oriented and benevolence-driven, which had highly revealed the interests of common people and reflected the rising class of landlords' progressive

claim for political participation and education. Confucius had been clinging to his fair education concept, i.e. “education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean” and he set up private schools to receive students among all citizens in a massive way, which had broken slave owners’ monopoly and control over education and knowledge, thereafter had promoted the popularization of culture and education among common people. Meanwhile, it enabled the rising class of landlords to gain an opportunity to participate in political reign and allowed common people to acquire knowledge previously monopolized by nobilities, which had laid a foundation for academic boom and “a hundred flowers blossom” flourishing during Spring and Autumn Period. Also it had paved a way for the political ruling of the rising successive dictators, landlords and had made a great influence on the current education career and development.

“Education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean” has just reviewed the connotation that Education is for all and everybody shall enjoy equal rights in receiving education, therefore it has strongly opposed that education is only patented to privileged class, group and community. However, facing up to the popularization of higher education nowadays in China, many wealthy young students can afford to study in highly expensive aristocratic schools, in contrast, many others are forced either to discontinue or drop from their studies due to economic difficulties, which, undoubtedly, is strongly against the principle of fair education.

In addition, students among many of our schools are distinctively stratified according to their academic performance, which is indeed strongly against the principle of fair education. Therefore, teachers at different levels shall rectify their teaching attitudes, actively perfect their moral ethics and deliver equal education among all students. Indeed our students have appeared to be a great variety of “differentiations” due to their family and education backgrounds, personality and traits, intelligence quotient and so on, which even has led to much more difficulties in teaching and educating students. Nevertheless, in line with the professional ethics of a teacher, a qualified teacher shall teach students without any prejudice shall neither spoil the rich and tops students nor isolate the poor and the bad students.

Whether the fair educational concept can be really implemented or every youth can equally enjoy modern education, indeed has labeled the progress of societal civilizations; meanwhile, whether a teacher can teach students without any prejudice, actually has indicated as a touchstone of professional ethics of a teacher. Thereafter, we do hope that the fair educational concept put forward by Confucius, i.e. “education should be done without the difference between the rich and the poor, or the noble and the mean” might well turn into reality in contemporary world.

**Reference (omitted)**

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