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ARTICLE

Creating Harmony from Diversity: What Confucianism Reveals about the True Value of Liberal Education for the 21st Century

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This paper takes inspiration from Confucius's teachings on social harmony to suggest that the most salient defense of a liberal education is that it is the indispensable means by which to parlay our increasingly diverse student populations into a more harmonious global society for the 21st century and beyond. Given the ever-increasing diversity of local communities and the globality of our social and professional lives as the significance of political boundaries and local citizenship fades, traditional defenses of a liberal education on the grounds that it prepares students for meaningful participation in local democracies or that it abstractly enhances life satisfaction, while valid, are no longer sufficient. Realizing that Confucius understood diversity on many levels as essential to cultivating social and universal harmony may help to reveal greater contemporary relevance of his teachings and bolster advocacy for a liberal education.

Keywords: liberal education; Confucius; harmony; diversity; globalization

To speak of social harmony is to deploy a metaphor, yet when Confucius noted that “the exemplary person harmonizes without being an echo. The petty person echoes and does not harmonize” (*Analects* 13.23),¹ he was speaking from within a cultural milieu that more strongly correlated harmonious musical expressions with social order than we are accustomed to. The *Book of Songs*² that comprises the earliest collection of Chinese verse, 305 pieces in all, was supposedly winnowed down by Confucius from a collection of 3,000 that had been gathered by officials sent into the remote towns and villages of the empire to collect folk songs to be used as a barometer for the sentiment of the masses. Meanwhile, at court, cosmic balance and the fate of the entire social and political order were understood to be contingent on the appropriate deployment of varied musical notes and timbres played on the musical instruments of the imperial orchestra.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Confucius clearly understood the added value that complementarity and diversity brought over uniformity in any number of human endeavors, from a ruler’s need for ministers of varied opinions to offer counsel to reach the best course of action to a chef’s need to draw from a stock of multiple ingredients to prepare a delicious meal.⁴

¹ Here and unless otherwise noted, I will be using Annping Chin’s (2014) translation of the *Analects*. However, I substitute “exemplary person” and “petty person” for “gentleman” and “petty man,” respectively, in part but not exclusively to avoid gender specification. In Chinese, the first term is *junzi*, which originally simply referred to the ruler’s son but has been conventionally understood in the Confucian context as a person of moral and intellectual achievement. In the *Analects*, this term is frequently contrasted with the *xiaoren*, or petty person, as it is here. It seems that Confucius sought to redeploy the term *junzi* as one that reflected moral and educational cultivation rather than birthright. For me, the term as used in the *Analects* is equally translatable as “liberally educated person.” This is not entirely without etymological grounding, as deriving from the Latin *liberalis*, it has among its glosses, “suitable for a gentleman (one not tied to a trade)” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (“liberal, adj. and n.” OED Online. September 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107863?redirectedFrom=liberal>).

² Also known as the *Odes*.

³ See Erica Fox Brindley (2012) for a substantial account of the connection between music and order in early China.

⁴ In the *Zuo Commentary*, one of the Confucian classics, there is a passage that asks, “If you season water with water, who is going to eat it? If you keep playing the same note on your lute, who is going to listen to it? The inadequacy of ‘agreement’ lies in this.” See *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals* Zhao 20, cited in Chin (2014, 213–214).

As a teacher, Confucius is perhaps best known for having instructed students on the appropriate performance of *li* or ritual propriety. This term covers a host of social behaviors that run the gamut from the finer points of daily etiquette to the most hallowed and sacred court rituals. That Confucius took the cultivation of social harmony as a core aim of this instruction can hardly be denied, as he explicitly says as much: “Harmony is what is most prized in the practice of the rites [li]” (*Analects* 1.12). As will be discussed at some length in this paper, it is also striking the extent to which Confucius’s curriculum and pedagogy directed at achieving social and universal harmony resonate with the core values and approaches of liberal education⁵ as it is generally understood today—for example, incorporating elements of cultural diversity, critical thinking, and community engagement, among others.

Today, the value of liberal education is under attack in the United States at the same time that our college population has become more diverse than ever before—a trend that is expected to continue robustly (Farrell 2010). While the globality of our social and professional lives increases and the significance of political boundaries and local citizenship fades, the most salient defense of liberal learning will involve co-opting Confucius’s apparent insight that a broad curriculum emphasizing worldliness, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and engaging with communities for the greater good is our best opportunity to parlay the rich global diversity of the 21st century into the most beautiful and complex harmony that the world has ever known. This will only be possible if we are able to resist the pressures of what

⁵ When I refer to liberal education I mean one that is broad-based, rather than vocationally focused on preparing students to do one specific kind of job. This usage is both historically and significantly distinct from the term ‘liberal arts,’ which has referred to a finite set of area studies and is currently associated with fields in the humanities and fine arts. Interestingly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities defines liberal education as “An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.” <http://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>. As will be discussed, it is significant for my argument here that complexity and diversity are specifically called out as key foci of liberal education.

Wendy Brown (2015) has recently identified as the encroachment of neoliberalism and the marketization of every aspect of modern life, including higher education. These forces are indeed all too evident in recent attacks on liberal education, such as North Carolina governor Patrick McCrory's quip that he does not want to subsidize education that "is not going to get someone a job"⁶ or President Obama's reflection that "folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.... I'm just saying you can make a really good living and have a great career without getting a four-year college education as long as you get the skills and the training that you need."⁷ In the face of these critiques, the prolific defenses of liberal education on the grounds that it does in fact represent excellent preparation for employment, that it cultivates a citizenry prepared for democratic participation, or that broad learning leads to greater life satisfaction are not entirely misguided. However, in the context of the global community of the 21st century and the concomitantly increasing value of worldliness, effective intercultural communication, critical thinking skills, and the need to act ethically with a clear understanding of the potentially universal impacts of our actions, such well rehearsed defenses are no longer sufficient. Exploring how Confucius saw diversity on many levels as beneficial and taught a set of ideals closely resembling those of contemporary liberal education in pursuit of the cultivation of "exemplary persons" for social and universal harmony may help to reveal greater merits of his teachings and bolster our advocacy of liberal education.

⁶ Kevin Kiley, "North Carolina governor joins chorus of Republicans critical of liberal arts," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 30, 2013. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/30/north-carolina-governor-joins-chorus-republicans-critical-liberal-arts>.

⁷ Scott Jaschik, "Obama becomes latest politician to criticize a liberal arts discipline," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 31, 2014. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/31/obama-becomes-latest-politician-criticize-liberal-arts-discipline>.

Additionally, the newly unveiled government scorecards for higher education institutions use college cost and earnings 10 years after graduation as two of the three metrics in their evaluations. The other is six-year graduation rate.

The Confucian Context: Harmony and Citizenship in Ancient China

Born in the small and vulnerable state of Lu on the Shandong Peninsula during the 6th century BCE, in a period of increasing instability of the central government known as the Zhou, Confucius became the archetype of a brand of teacher-philosopher known as the “wandering persuader.” Such teacher-philosophers sought an audience at court with the ruler in order to offer insights about the proper Way (*Dao*) of living and governing well. Ideally, a patron would be persuaded by his teachings and enact them in his state. Much has been written about and attributed to Confucius throughout the millennia of Chinese tradition since his death, and the consensus of modern scholars is that the contents of the *Analects*—at least the first 15 of its 20 books—offers us the most reliable insight into the teachings and historical figure of Confucius. It is primarily this source, from which Chinese scholar and translator Anping Chin noted that “most of Confucius’ thought and character can be gleaned,” (2014, 24) that I will draw on for understanding of what the Confucian program entailed.

Confucius, like many modern defenders of liberal education, expressed consternation over those who sought training simply for the sake of salary and public prestige, scoffing at those who derided him for failing to attain a high official position and retorting that “when the state is not governed according to the moral way, it would be shameful to accept a salary” (*Analects* 14.1; Slingerland 2003, 21). Confucius’s curriculum, which included instilling a love of learning and self-cultivation that would bring a lifetime of joy, community engagement, and harmonious existence, aimed to effect social harmony through training in ritual propriety modeled on the forms of a supposed golden age of centuries earlier. Socio-political participation in the community was understood as expanding from relationships at the microcosmic level of the family to those of the greater social, political, and universal communities—a sort of set of concentric circles of ethical behavior. As Chenyang Li has noted in his exploration of the notion of harmony in Confucianism, “Harmony can take place between individuals at the level of family, the community, the nation, and the world.... Confucianism puts tremendous weight

on interpersonal harmony, such as the harmony between ruler and minister, between parent and child, between husband and wife, between siblings, and between friends. It also places tremendous weight on the harmony between human society and the natural world. Its ultimate goal is to achieve a grand harmony throughout the cosmos” (2006, 588). Like Confucianism, liberal education programs today tend to value pluralism, fostering relationships among disparate populations while identifying connections across bodies of knowledge that have traditionally been isolated from one another. All of this has a primary aim of illuminating truths of shared humanity and interdependence, pointing to a cooperative stewardship of the social and natural worlds we inhabit.

Although, as it turned out, the training in classical rituals and texts that Confucius endorsed would eventually come to serve as the foundation for the examination system for official positions throughout dynastic China, it is clear that Confucius himself did not consider a “utilitarian” or “vocational” basis for intellectual cultivation and moral learning to be sufficient. In fact, when Mencius, one of Confucius’s early disciples, travelled a great distance to gain an audience with King Hui of Liang in an effort to persuade him of the Confucian way, he was asked what profit his teachings could bring to the state. Mencius’s response addresses what he sees as the inappropriate framework for the question: “Why must Your Majesty say, ‘profit’? Let there be benevolence and righteousness and that is all.”⁸ Of course, social harmony—peace, a well-ordered state, and a widespread sense of fulfillment that uses its diversity to its greatest possible benefit—is also “profitable” in a sense. But the pursuit of profits associated with benevolence and righteousness transcends the pursuits of individual wealth, prestige, and power (which translate well into the modern ubiquity of anxiety over profitability as return on investment and the bottom line) in that it encompasses a broader social scope rather than focusing narrowly on the individual. In other words, it privileges the creation of harmony and a greater good over individual advantage. It seems clear that in the 21st century and beyond, global cooperation serving mutual interests will be far more necessary than in the recent past.

⁸ *Mencius* 1A1. Translation in Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2005, 117).

Of course, none of this is to claim that Western arguments for liberal education have *always* narrowly focused on the individual. Martha Nussbaum is quite right when she says that the “relationship of a liberal education to citizenship” has a long history in the West and that an inherent “liberalness” of liberal education is its ability to “liberate the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world” (1997, 8). Additionally, as has been noted above, promoting (or maintaining) democracy has been regularly cited as a core upshot of liberal education that renders it indispensable to democratic societies. In both democratic and traditional Confucian societies, an inextricable connection between higher education and citizenship has existed and “it is *because* it is intimately connected with citizenship and the family that its universalization does not threaten, but promises to strengthen” community (Nussbaum 1998, 32, emphasis mine). In the West this connection between liberal education and the wider community has tended to mean learning for the sake of more meaningful democratic participation, which typically entails, at a minimum, making informed decisions in electing representatives to make laws that govern one’s society. In the Confucian case, however, citizenship has tended to mean carrying out one’s social role in a manner that was earnest, spontaneous, and that channeled individual desires through socially responsible and sustainable forms (li, ritual propriety) with an eye toward participating in an all-inclusive *universal* harmony. Consider that an important Confucian text, *Doctrine of the Mean*, proclaims, “In achieving moderation and harmony, Heaven and Earth maintain their appropriate positions and the myriad things flourish” (See Li 2006, 588). This quotation in particular underscores the inspiring breadth of vision that characterizes the Confucian program.

Whereas broad and sustained learning is crucial for participation of the citizenry in a robust democracy, the Confucian program seeks the cultivation of exemplary people who are both broadly learned in culture and able to give vent to their desires in ways that contribute to social harmony. As the *Analects* (6.27) have it, “The exemplary person broadens his learning in literature and holds himself back with the practice of the rites. And so, he is able not to go beyond the bounds of the moral way.” Part of going “beyond the bounds” is acting in a manner that places

individual concerns above those of the larger community, which raises the question of citizenship. As A.T. Nuyen has noted, the Confucian style of citizenship “has much to contribute to the critique of the liberal conception of citizenship, as well as to the construction of a more viable conception, one that has a better chance to cope with the effects of globalisation” (2002, 127). Informed engagement in local democracy may no longer be sufficient for an age that demands world citizenship and harmonies constituted not only of local diversities but forged from what would otherwise be a global cacophony of systems and cultures. In the 21st century and beyond, the cultivation of worldliness and broad learning will become an even more powerful aim than that of informed participation in local democracy. As Confucianism and liberal education engage students to operate in ways that make them appreciate themselves in broader, more universal contexts, those who take this educational course will be prepared to navigate the coming world with greater ease. What is at stake is more than our economic viability or even our democracy. The very possibility of cultivating harmonious collaboration in the face of issues with ever-increasing global relevance—ecology, international trade equity, poverty, children’s welfare, to name but a few—depends on liberally educating the masses.

Confucian and Liberal Education Curricular Elements ***Critical Thinking***

Central to the liberal education mission is the notion that genuinely valuable learning is not characterized by the memorization of a body of information but rather necessarily entails an ability to respond intuitively and appropriately to myriad situations, engage meaningfully with those around us, and cultivate the wherewithal to interact peacefully and productively with all. Almost unavoidably, schooling requires “learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning. But it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination” (Nussbaum 1998, 14). Confucius also reflected on the shortcomings of an education that emphasized the learning of material (knowing *that*) over one that cultivated proper action and etiquette in making connections with others in the world (knowing *how*):

A person may be able to recite the three hundred poems, but if he is unable to put [this knowledge] to full use when he is given a political assignment, or if he is unable to hold his own in a diplomatic exchange when he is sent abroad on a mission, no matter how many poems he has learned, what good will it do? (*Analects* 13.5)

A number of salient points surface within this passage. First is the obvious rejection of pedanticism and confusing knowledge with wisdom. Any worthwhile education will ensure that a student is capable of carrying out productive tasks to serve humanity and “do good.” When one navigates the myriad personal and professional challenges with which our lives are inevitably fraught, liberally educated persons, as a result of their agile and flexible mind, will handle matters with aplomb. Their response will result in greater happiness, fulfillment, sympathy, and understanding for all. Second, and perhaps surprisingly to some, Confucius has noted the importance of being multicultural, even worldly, which gives us a hint that his world likely looked as diverse to him as ours does to us. The ability to make connections with people of radically diverse experiences, from different parts of the world, whose daily realities and existence may be vastly disparate from one’s own is an absolutely indispensable component of a worthwhile education. To be able to take our fellow human, whoever s/he may be, as interlocutor in productive, pleasant, and effective conversation is the mark of a liberally educated person. Becoming the person who is capable of all this justifies the pursuit of a liberal education in its own right.

Confucius also emphasized the critical balance between expanding one’s knowledge base and thinking critically about what one has learned: “If you learn but do not think, you will be dazed. If you think but do not learn, you will be in danger” (*Analects* 2.15). Appropriately, in a Confucian education curricular materials will serve as a point of entry for critical and analytical thinking, allowing students to hone their written and oral communication skills, debate conflicting interpretations, and disentangle complex arguments. However, regardless of the subject under study, it is the critical thinking and reasoning skills *about* the content that constitute the pedagogical “point.” To cite a single example for illustration, I annually offer a

semester-long course on Chinese cinema—“non-vocational training,” to be sure. Over the course of a few months, students view a dozen films and learn what I consider a somewhat minimal amount about the rather broad topic of Chinese cinema. Much more valuable, though, is the growth students make in terms of their ability to think critically about the perspectives and motivations of characters whose life experiences are drastically at odds with their own, learning a lexicon for intelligently discussing the significance of the things they have seen with classmates, and honing visual literacy. This is the kind of productive learning that occurs in the course. One important outcome of liberal education is that it “slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one’s own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself” (Delbanco 2012, 32). Absent this kind of material foundation, the formulation of uninformed opinions with no reference to reality is inevitable and indeed quite dangerous. As Martha Nussbaum noted in extolling the virtues of a liberal education, “Exploring the way in which another society has organized matters of human well-being, or gender, or sexuality, or ethnicity and religion will make the pupil see that other people in viable societies have done things very differently” (1998, 476). Failing to militate against the uninformed tendency to essentialize and “failure to think critically produces a democracy in which people talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason” (1998, 473). Of course, it is not only democracy that is in jeopardy here. Cultivating critical thinking and global perspectives in pursuit of harmony “provide(s) us with a fundamental attitude toward the world problems facing us, an attitude of determination that we must resolve conflicts by harmonization rather than conquest,” as Chenyang Li has observed (2006, 596).

Interestingly, an 11th-century commentator on Confucius’s teaching on balancing thinking and learning suggested that its purpose is to encourage students to “learn broadly, ask searchingly, reflect carefully, distinguish clearly, and act earnestly. To be lacking in one of these is to fail to learn” (in Ames and Rosemont 1998, 233 n. 33). What we desire in students is not “the voice of tradition or convention, the voice of the parent, of friends, of fashion” (Nussbaum 1998, 28)—we want the student’s

considered reflection and most personal critical response so that transcending the prejudicial influences born of the imperfect knowledge and violence of the past can become possible. In Confucius's teachings, we also find these liberal ideals for education, and can use them to make the connection between thinking critically and cultivating a harmonious society.

Learning Broadly

In the context of modern liberal education, we often speak of cultivating a love of learning, exploring broadly or learning to learn, so that our education is productive in the sense that it will withstand changing market forces and will prepare students for their sixth job out of college as well as their first. As a report of the Yale faculty of 1828 put it, liberal education is “not to teach that which is peculiar to any one of the professions; but to lay the foundation which is common to them all” (in Zakaria 2015, 51). John Dewey noted that, “the kind of person who should emerge from a truly liberalized education would be one prepared to learn throughout life” (in Kimball 1995, 169, n. 25), and in his recent book defending liberal education, Fareed Zakaria has emphasized that a critical benefit of liberal education is to “enjoy the intellectual adventure enough” to engage in such pursuits often throughout life (2015, 61). More important still, intellectual curiosity and knowing how to learn are necessary fundamentals for the greater achievement of becoming an exemplary person who is able to contribute to social harmony. That such accomplishment requires a lifelong commitment to and love of learning, *philosophia*, comes to light explicitly in the West in Socrates's exhortation to give value to life by continuously examining it. Confucius also calls us to dedicate ourselves to lifelong cultivation and examination, for which his following autobiographical reflection serves as a model:

At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I found my balance through the rites; at forty, I was free from doubts [about myself]. At fifty, I understood what Heaven intended me to do. At sixty, I was attuned to what I heard. At seventy, I followed what my heart desired without overstepping the line.
(*Analects* 2.4)

Both the state of mind he achieved by age seventy and the fact that such cultivation had taken his entire life to accomplish are noteworthy. But what is particularly interesting to note when taking harmony as central to education is that this ideal state only becomes possible *after* the attunement of the ear (at age sixty), reminding us of the relatively integrated nature of the ethical and aesthetic aspects of harmony in the early Chinese context. It is also significant for our discussion that during this process of self-cultivation and learning that Confucius recounts late in his life, he seems to take two spiritual milestones as worthy of mention in that they provide greater personal freedom or liberation as a result of his commitment to learning. First, he writes that at forty he became free of personal doubt, suggesting that clarity of purpose and self-confidence are key components to life satisfaction. Second, by the time he is seventy, having attuned his ear, Confucius notes that he has reached such a level of training and cosmic understanding that he is able to act spontaneously according to his desires without fear of misstep or insult. What makes this state possible is having so internalized the drive to learn and act in accord with the Way—the overarching universal process—that he has refined his subjective desires to the degree that appropriate action has become second nature. Thus, as Socrates pursued the “good life” through self-examination, the well cultivated, exemplary person for Confucius is one who has an ear for the harmony in which s/he participates with ease. Great nobility and 21st century relevance combine in the inherent social focus of the Confucian model, particularly when diversity—the raw stuff of harmony—is so near at hand.

As for the appropriate content of this lifelong pursuit of learning, a passage that recalls contemporary rhetoric about the alleged impracticality and economic unsoundness of liberal education as compared to vocational training can be instructive. In this passage Confucius is mocked by a villager who sarcastically remarks, “How great is Confucius! He is vastly learned, and so has not made a name for himself in any particular area.” In response, Confucius sarcastically proclaims to his disciples that he will specialize in charioteering (*Analects* 9.2). As charioteering was the “least respectable of the gentlemanly arts,” Confucius seeks to make the rhetorical point that, while there is certainly value in and need for the skills of a

charioteer, the course of narrowly cultivating a single specialization is not the aim of the exemplary person. But, in fact, Confucius reveals that having come from a humble background, he was actually “skilled in many menial things.” Nevertheless, he goes on to ask, “Should an exemplary person be proficient in many menial tasks? No, definitely not” (*Analects* 9.6).

One might also consider the following exchange that Confucius had with a student who wanted to learn about farming:

Fan Chi wanted to learn [from his teacher] how to grow grain crops. The Master said, “An old farmer would be a better person to ask.” He wanted to learn how to grow vegetables. The Master said, “An old gardener would be a better person to ask.” After Fan Chi had left, the Master said, “What a simple-petty person Fan Xu [Fan Chi] is! If those above love the rites, then none of the common people will dare to be disrespectful. If those above love rightness, then none of the common people will dare to be disobedient. If those above love trustworthiness, then none of the common people will dare not to be forthcoming about the truth of things. When [the governing principle of a place] is like this, then people will flock to it from all directions with babies strapped to their backs. What need is there to learn about growing grain crops? (*Analects* 13.4)⁹

This passage perhaps best reveals Confucius’s attitude toward “vocational” or skills training. While farming is certainly a necessary skill for sustaining life, Confucius seems to argue that as long as there is learning on social and cultural forms of propriety, on appropriate conduct, and on trustworthiness, and that learning is put into practice by the kind of social leaders he seeks to cultivate, then the essentials of harmony and the attainment of practical skills necessary for good living will fall into place to such an extent that the utopian nature of the state will gain in reputation and attract new residents who wish to add

⁹ A “petty person” is the opposite of the “exemplary person” in the text. The petty person is “small” or narrow, in contrast to the breadth of learning that the exemplary person has attained.

their voices to the thriving harmony. Confucius recognized that what was at risk in his time, as in our own, was not that fundamental or technical skills would go unlearned; because of the inherent necessity for such goods as food and transportation, there would always be a labor force trained to carry out and deliver on these needs. Rather, the bigger concern and anxiety, as it ought to be today, was over the very real possibility that global political and economic systems would fall into chaos and fail to rise to the challenge of cooperatively acting across traditional boundaries to repair things in a mode of collaboration rather than conflict.

Given this disposition toward certain areas of marketable specialization and so-called “menial things,” one may also well wonder if Confucius’s perspective did not amount to the kind of “fear of being useful” that Paul Jay and Gerald Graff identified as an increasingly problematic phenomenon among academics in the humanities in a 2012 essay of the same title:

Traditionalists argue that emphasizing professional skills would betray the humanities’ responsibility to honor the great monuments of culture for their own sake...concluding that the humanities should resist our culture’s increasing fixation on a practical, utilitarian education.... If there is a crisis in the humanities, then, it stems less from their inherent lack of practical utility than from our humanistic disdain for such utility, which too often prevents us from taking advantage of the vocational opportunities presented to us. This lofty disdain for the market has thwarted the success of the few programs that have recognized that humanities graduates have much to offer.... In fact, we would argue there is no defense of the humanities that is not ultimately based on the useful skills it teaches.¹⁰ (Jay and Graff 2012)

For Jay and Graff, the pitch is that non-specialized humanistic learning is in fact, if counterintuitively, highly “useful” training for marketing oneself for employment

¹⁰ Paul Jay and Gerald Graff, “Fear of Being Useful,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 5, 2012. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/01/05/essay-new-approach-defend-value-humanities>.

in any number of varied careers after graduation—a particularly popular defense of liberal education of late. To be sure, we want and even need our graduates to be employable in fulfilling work after graduation, and we increase our chances that this will happen if we train them to have the flexible minds and communication skills that will serve them in any number of endeavors. Given that Confucius himself was both a worldly sage and capable of skilled labor, he can be understood to be defending his broad, non-specialized curriculum from precisely this place. While he clearly understands the practical need for charioteers and other tradesmen and artisans, the highest educational value for Confucius is the cultivation of one's moral self through training in the social rituals and folkways that had (supposedly) resulted in a grand cosmic harmony in days of yore. While some members of society would certainly perform the necessary work of laborers, such as wheelwrights and carpenters—an equally important component of universal harmony—these citizens were also fathers, siblings, and spouses, which gave them no less need of moral cultivation for proper social participation. In a time before the term “social network” had the global, online connotations that it does today, Julia Ching made note of the traditional Chinese worldview that sees “the person in the context of a social network rather than as an individual” (1998, 72). Thus, skills training for the many vocations was simply not within Confucius's curricular purview. His teachings took as their mission the cultivation of exemplary people, who were devoted to learning the Way; while the Way is certainly not a narrow vocational path, it is at its best a path for producing harmonious citizenship in Confucian or global society. Of course, the likely reality is that the majority of those who were able to study the Confucian curriculum found themselves, by virtue of their training as well as their antecedent social status, both inclined and qualified to fill important leadership positions in government rather than toil as manual laborers. However, this fact does not diminish the point that the Confucian justification for moral and spiritual cultivation was the pursuit of achieving universal harmony, a constituent element of which was certainly the necessity of maintaining material life through labor. Confucius remarked at one point, “I could not prove myself in office. That is why I acquired many skills” (*Analects* 9.7). As Confucius patiently awaited official patronage that would afford

him the opportunity for major social impact, he apparently learned to contribute to the material economy directly through “marketable” labor forms. Such ability in no way detracted from his moral achievement or his ability to participate in creating universal harmony. Confucius was rightly confident that one “who studies is unlikely to be inflexible” (*Analects* 1.8).

Community Engagement and Benevolence

Another key facet of liberal education is that learning is never disconnected from the prevailing realities outside the campus gates. Truly valuable liberal learning must be attained always in the spirit of communitarianism and promoting the greater good. In fact, most liberal education institutions today take the cultivation of a community among their students as a core institutional value, both as a pedagogical principle and one that assures the satisfaction and added value of the learning experience for their students. Engagement with extramural communities is also a regular component in liberal education today, and partnerships with other organizations in the community, externships, and service-learning are now commonplace in higher education. In his sweeping narrative of the history of liberal education in the West, Bruce Kimball recognizes a well established anxiety over the risk that “the individualism and free pursuit of truth of the philosophical mind and liberal-free ideal hazard self-indulgent and nihilistic education and culture, which can finally lead to anarchy.... That searching for truth without giving commensurate attention to the importance of public expression inevitably leads the individual to isolation and self-indulgence and the republic to amoralism and chaos” (1995, 237–238). For Confucius's part, the absolute imperative and resulting satisfaction of putting into practice what one has learned is expressed in the opening passage of the *Analects*: “Is it not a pleasure to learn and, when it is timely, to practice what you have learned?” (1.1). Both the Western and Confucian tradition, then, are clearly conscious that valuable learning can never be a purely selfish pursuit entered into with the aim of self-aggrandizement or amoral experimentation and insulated from the need for virtue and ethical action within the context of a greater community, which increasingly means a globally constituted one. The risk of ruin and discord that results from insular learning detached from community realities will have an ever-

more expansive field in which to proliferate as globalization and interconnectedness extends.

In his teachings, Confucius often speaks of *ren* (usually translated as “benevolence”). That the precise meaning of this term is unclear is evident by the number of inquiries he gets on the topic from his students. While debate on this question continues among Confucius scholars, it is perhaps best to look to descriptions of Confucius’s actions when abroad to discern the kind of comportment he found both appropriate and effective. During those occasions Confucius is described as “affable, kind, and respectful,” and proves himself exemplary “by showing restraint in his action and a willingness to yield” (*Analects* 1.10). One can only imagine the increase in harmony of international relations if all world leaders would follow this same course.

Speaking metaphorically of benevolence as a physical space, the *Analects* also imagines its benefit to a harmonious world community: “Of neighborhoods benevolence is the most beautiful. How can the person be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in benevolence?” (*Analects* 4.1).¹¹ The liberally educated, of course, do have the freedom to choose: at some level, choice is the very kind of liberation that characterizes this type of higher education. Here, I shall leave these meditations on a harmonious world characterized by Confucian benevolence and widespread communitarianism with the following passage, in which one of Confucius’s disciples asks him about larger scale application of the principles of goodness: “Zigong said, ‘If there is someone able who is generous to his people and works to give relief to all those in need, what do you think of him? Can he be called humane?’ The Master said, ‘This is no longer a matter of humaneness. You must be referring to a sage!’” (*Analects* 6.30). The prospects for human peace and prosperity in the 21st century and beyond will depend on the cultivation of a critical mass of benevolent sages who understand the global impact of even the most localized of actions, realizing that the “neighborhoods” of benevolence that we inhabit go beyond our local communities.

¹¹ This translation is taken from D.C. Lau (1979).

Pedagogy

It may be of some interest to note that in pursuit of his educational values, Confucius promoted a number of academic policies and pedagogical techniques that resonate with current highly regarded practices in liberal education. Mirroring the liberal spirit of social fluidity and access to education for all, Confucius testified to the accessibility of his teaching for worthy students from less privileged backgrounds (Confucius himself did not come from an elite family), claiming that he had “never refused to teach anyone who, on his own, has brought me a bundle of dried meat [on his first visit]” (*Analects* 7.7). Once under his tutelage, however, students were expected to be curious and proactive critical thinkers who would actively engage in problem solving, as can be seen from what amounts to a kind of Confucian teaching manifesto: “I will not give a person a boost or a start if he does not know the frustration [of trying to solve a difficult problem] or the frenzy one would get into when trying [to put an idea] into words. After I have shown a student one corner of a square, if he does not come back with the other three, I will not repeat what I have done” (*Analects* 7.8). Of course, this is entirely at odds with widespread impressions of Chinese learning styles that supposedly require students to memorize and recite troves of ancient texts without the slightest reflection on their significance. Apparently, however accurately these impressions reflect subsequent epochs of Chinese pedagogical methods, whether in the name of Confucius or otherwise, the texts that best represent his teaching style and curriculum suggest that Confucius’s methods demanded that students actively engage in critical thinking.

Another trend in higher education anticipated by Confucius is an emphasis on so-called lateral learning, a process in which students are encouraged to learn from each other, with the instructor downgraded from the conventional “sage on the stage” to something like a “guide on the side.” This pedagogical style, of course, requires some humility on the part of the professor, a trait that Confucius himself clearly exemplified. One of his most famous lines, indeed one with which nearly all educated Chinese are familiar, is, “When three of us are walking, I am bound to find my teachers there. I would single out the good points in others and try to follow them, and I would notice their bad points and try to correct them in myself”

(*Analects* 7.22). Here, Confucius has humbly suggested that every social interaction is an opportunity for even the most academically and morally accomplished of us to enjoy spiritual and intellectual growth, regardless of the level of our interlocutors. Similarly, when Confucius “was singing with others and liked a particular song, he would invariably ask that the song be repeated before he would join in” so as to ensure that he could catch the nuances and contribute to the harmony (*Analects* 7.32). Let us listen carefully, then, to the songs that our diverse student bodies and our local and global communities are singing so that we too can respond accordingly and ensure that we do not lapse into discord and chaotic cacophony.

Conclusion

At a historical moment of heightened anxiety over the relevance and sustainability of liberal education in the United States, this paper has suggested that, as counterintuitive as it may seem, Confucius’s 6th century BCE approach to cultivating universal harmony offers helpful perspective and direction for bolstering defenses of the salience of liberal education for the masses in the 21st century. Given the rapidly changing contours and diminishing significance of conventional boundaries—such as national identity, political boundaries, and the immediacy of global interpersonal communication—the practical need for “global citizenship” in navigating productive and peaceful daily life is greater than ever before. In the context of our increasingly diverse communities, “advocacy of a harmonious society in which different groups can blend their efforts in contributing to the community’s affairs while retaining their distinctive identities” and realizing that “harmony is not conformity but is rather a sublation of both individuality and conformity that allows for individual differences to manifest in community action” is the best way forward (Nuyen 2002, 136). Perhaps ironically, the pre-modern era in which Confucius lived, when the Chinese understood their cultural dominion to be “all under Heaven,” is, at least in taking a global¹² perspective, more like our present and future than what has come immediately before.

¹² Actually, the earth was flat and square or cruciform in their imagination, as noted above.

Given the centrality of preparing students “to deal with complexity, diversity, and change” in liberal arts (as per AAC&U’s definition of the term, and what we generally understand it to mean), it is the prospect for creating a meaningful global harmony—a felicitous, mutually enhancing relationship formed among a complex and diverse field of dynamic individuals, resulting in an outcome that is ethically and aesthetically greater than the sum of its parts—that makes the strongest case for liberal education in the 21st century. Today, proponents of liberal education would do well to cite these Confucian aims and traditions in defense of liberal education’s continuing and even increasing value for advancing the human cause by valuing connections and relational notions of humanity over autonomous ones.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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