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Liberal Arts Education in the Universities of Greater China: Historical Legacy, Current Models, and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Liberal arts education is usually regarded as a legacy from the Greek and Roman classics, adapted in American universities, with little awareness of its deep roots in Confucian heritage education. In this paper, we begin with an introduction to the liberal arts in Chinese Christian universities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries where Chinese classical scholars cooperated with North American missionaries in creating campuses characterised by a rich flow of ideas and architectural patterns rooted in China's traditions. Although these Christian universities were closed more than seventy years ago, their influence and legacy are still having an impact on higher education in China and beyond. Some institutions carried on their legacy and have developed into universities with strong liberal arts traditions. Following this thread, the paper presents three current models of liberal arts education in universities in Greater China (Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China), showing how each has built on this inheritance in a distinctive Chinese context. In the final section of the paper, we discuss the possibility of reimagining Confucian humanism through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This in turn serves to rephrase the Confucian canon in a universal language and explore its contribution to whole person development for current and future social challenges, which is the core value of liberal arts education in Chinese contexts.

Keywords: Liberal arts education; Christian universities; Whole person education; Confucian humanism

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Introduction

Increasing attention is currently being given to the importance of higher education for cultivating well-informed global citizens, with professional skills, civic engagement, and a sense of social responsibility (Wheelahan et al., 2022; Wheelahan & Pietsch, 2020). Such qualities are an important preparation for social challenges such as climate change, the continuing pandemic and disturbing geopolitics (Harari, 2020; Oleksiyenko et al., 2020). In this regard, liberal arts education (LAE) is at the heart of the discussion as it has a clear vision for the cultivation of students by fostering innovation, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and a sense of social responsibility (Nishimura & Sasao, 2019). Although it is often regarded as arising from Greek and Roman origins and as a feature of American higher education, LAE has been developed widely as an approach to global higher learning and is implemented in many institutions around the globe (Jung et al., 2016; Nishimura & Sasao, 2019). Recent decades witnessed the global rise of LAE programs, with a notably strong presence in Asia (Godwin, 2018; Godwin, 2015). However, LAE is not something new to Chinese contexts. The LAE tradition in higher education institutions in China can be traced back to the former Christian universities in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the core values of LAE are also deeply rooted in Chinese culture and Confucian educational philosophy and values.

In the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century a number of Christian universities were established in China, with support from North American and European missionaries (Lutz, 1971). These universities adapted LAE from North America and Europe into Chinese contexts with their specific culture and traditions (Mou, 2018, 2020). In these Christian universities, Chinese classical scholars cooperated with Western missionaries and created campuses characterised by a rich flow of ideas and architectural patterns rooted in China's traditions (Dong, 2023). These Christian universities implemented LAE effectively on Chinese soil as the core values or educational ideas from Confucianism echoed with the goal of LAE for whole person cultivation. Although these Christian universities were closed seventy years ago, their influence and legacy are still having an impact on higher education in China and beyond. Some institutions have carried on their legacy and have

developed into universities with strong LAE traditions (Mou, 2021; P. Ng, 2001). Among contemporary liberal arts universities in Chinese contexts, the LAE that has been carried forward from Christian higher education and developed in specific social contexts, has an emphasis on whole person cultivation, integrating values from Confucian thought and features of specific social contexts in cultivating global citizens for the 21st century (Mou, 2022). Looking forward to the prospects and direction of LAE, the humanistic ideas from Confucianism could bring insights for a global model of LAE and contribute to higher education development in the world of the 21st century. This in turn could serve to rephrase the Confucian canons in a universal language and explore their contribution to whole person development for current and future social challenges, which is a core value of liberal arts education in Chinese contexts.

This paper includes three sections on LAE in Chinese contexts: the legacy from historical institutions, current models in contemporary universities, and prospects for global higher education development. The first section discusses the LAE tradition in the former Christian universities in China, which was integrated within the Chinese social context. It also notes the early educators who made their efforts in implementing liberal arts models and doing experiments by integrating Western LAE into Chinese classical studies and developing a unique Chinese model in the early 20th century. The second section brings findings from an empirical study of LAE implementation in three case institutions in the Greater China area -Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China (Mou, 2022). These contemporary universities are related to the former Christian universities and inherited their legacy and tradition in LAE. The new models of LAE have adapted to the distinctive social, cultural, and political contexts of the three Chinese societies. The third section examines Confucian thought and values in terms of their relevance for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and explores how these Confucian values could be brought into a broader context and contribute to whole person development at a global level within new forms of LAE in the 21st century.

The Liberal Arts Legacy from the Past

The liberal arts are usually regarded as a legacy from the Greek and Roman classics, adapted in American universities, with little awareness of their deep

roots in Confucian heritage education. Many are unaware that LAE has a long history of development in China's higher education system, tracing back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the former Christian universities (Hayhoe & Lu, 2010). At that time, there were 16 Christian universities in China¹, founded by North American and European missionaries (Lutz, 1971). Of the 16 universities, 3 were Catholic and 13 were Protestant, the latter being funded through the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA). In these universities, Chinese scholars and foreign missionaries worked together in developing LAE for the Chinese context. The former Christian universities contributed to China's higher education development by setting up educational models, that pioneered modern medical and nursing programs, and exercised leadership in higher education for women (Lutz, 1971). Of particular note were two institutions specifically for women among the thirteen, Ginling Women's College, and Hwa Nan Women's College, which educated women leaders and promoted gender equity in education (Zhu & Li, 2023). By adapting LAE from Western models, these universities developed their own unique approach, with general education courses alongside professional training, practice and internship, and extracurricular activities (Mou, 2018). A remarkable part of the heritage that relates to the liberal arts was the revival of classical Chinese architecture and its harmonious interaction with Western patterns. Their campus architecture has been credited by a current scholar with having revived this important heritage (Dong, 2005).

The LAE in China's historical Christian Universities reflected the local context and social environment, with Chinese classical texts forming an important part of their liberal arts curriculum (Mou, 2018). Adapting American LAE models into Chinese contexts with its distinctly different social and cultural traditions, the Christian universities endeavoured to cultivate graduates to serve China's development. Readings in Chinese classics, history, philosophy, ethics and literature conveyed traditional Chinese values (Mou, 2018). Moreover, professional courses integrating local features in the curriculum equipped

¹ Usually, the 13 Protestant Institutions refer to St. John's University in Shanghai, the University of Shanghai (Hu-chiang University), Soochow University, Hangchow University, the University of Nanking, Ginling College, Shantung Christian University (Cheeloo University), Fukien Christian University, Lingnan University, Yenching University, Hwa Nan Women's College, West China Union University, and Huachung University (Central China University); 3 Roman Catholic Institutions refer to Chen-tan University, Fu-jeu Catholic University, and Tsinku University.

students with the skill set needed for social development. Some universities were famous for their strong professional programs, such as home economics in Ginling Women's College, medical and dental programs in West China Union University, and agricultural programs in Lingnan University.

In their mission and goals, the Christian universities advocated all-around development of students with a spirit of service to the country (Mou, 2018). For example, Ginling College aimed to cultivate Christian women leaders for China by offering an education that would strengthen character, deepen purpose, and inspire commitment to an "abundant life" of service. Similarly, Lingnan focused on promoting Christian higher education in China and made an endeavour to cultivate graduates with higher quality to serve the society. With a focus on service and social responsibility, Yenching aimed at offering the best possible quality of intellectual and religious leadership for China and cultivating graduates who would make a contribution to the building of a new China. The ethos of the West China Union University brought together scientific and moral education. The university's code of conduct was summarized in an eight-character motto: benevolence, knowledge, loyalty, courage, honesty, prudence, diligence and harmony. These are precisely the Confucian virtues of classical Chinese education.

The LAE curriculum in China's Christian universities mainly followed then standards of American liberal arts curricula, aiming providing the same high level of education to Chinese students as was available to students in America at that time. English was usually the language of instruction and the courses covered a broad range of disciplines, including humanities, arts, sciences and social sciences (Mou, 2018). General education courses included philosophy, psychology, history, physics, chemistry, biology, and economics, among others. Chinese courses, such as Chinese Classics, Chinese philosophy, Chinese history, or Chinese literature, took the place of Western classics in the LAE curriculum in American universities with the same intention of training the mind with an exposure to broad knowledge. After the first two years of general education, students focused on professional courses in their third and fourth years, culminating in a thesis required for the completion of undergraduate study in order to meet the requirements for a Bachelor's degree. On the professional side, the Christian universities had a range of professional courses

for students and required a major and a minor concentration in their program of study. Particular emphasis was put on the purpose of cultivating talent for China's social development. For example, Yenching cooperated with factories that provided students with internship opportunities. Lingnan developed featured programs in agriculture and horticulture, taking advantage of the geographic features of Guangdong province. West China Union University was a comprehensive university with a strong medical college, focusing on cultivating medical and dental professionals.

On the Catholic side there are also interesting cases. Ma Xiangbo, a leading Catholic scholar who joined the Jesuit order for a period of time, was dissatisfied with the approach of the French Jesuits who founded Zhendan (Aurora) University and moved to pioneer Fudan, a second Aurore in 1905 (Hayhoe, 2018). Being trained in both the Chinese and European classics at a high level, Ma Xiangbo made a unique contribution to the liberal arts in the foundation he laid for Fudan and his later contribution to the establishment of Furen University in Beijing. Ma was committed to establishing a modern Chinese society on concepts firmly rooted in classical Chinese understanding. In his vision of university model and curriculum patterns, he emphasized a deep level balancing of Chinese and European knowledge. Fudan University became the leading comprehensive university in East China in the 1950s and after the reform and opening up it developed a distinctive LAE model which can be traced back to the spirit of the founder, Ma Xiangbo (Chai et al., 2016).

Although the former Christian universities merged into public universities during the higher education reform of the 1950's in China, their heritage and influence are still present today in many different ways, visible and invisible. In the 1950s, in mainland China, Chinese leaders turned to follow the Soviet higher education system and build highly specialised professional and technological universities (Hayhoe, 1999). During this time, many universities were re-organized with Christian universities that had strong majors and disciplines, together with their faculty members and students merged into newly established public universities. In some cases, the faculty and programs from the Christian universities laid the foundation for the host universities to develop strong programs that carried forward some of their unique qualities. Most of their beautiful campuses are still being used today. For example, Yenching's campus

is now used by Peking University, Cheeloo's campus by Shandong University, University of Nanking's campus by Nanjing University, St John's campus by the East China University of Political Science and Law, Hu-chiang's campus by the Shanghai University of Science and Technology, West China Union's campus by Sichuan University, and Lingnan's campus by Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) University. It is worth noting that another six of the campuses of Christian universities, together with some of their faculties and programs, were re-organized into normal universities focusing on humanities and teacher education. Fukien Christian University and Hwa Nan Women's College are today's Fujian Normal University, Ginling Women's College has become Nanjing Normal University, Huachung University is now Central China Normal University, Soochow University first became Jiangsu Normal University and then was later merged into today's Suzhou University, and Hangchow Christian University originally became Zhejiang Normal College, was later renamed Hangzhou University, and finally merged into today's Zhejiang University.² Today's universities, with certain strong disciplines and majors are still able to trace the origins to the former Christian universities before closedown. One of the reasons normal universities have remained influential institutions in China may well be the consonance between Confucian values and the French ideas lying behind the Ecoles Normales founded after the French Revolution to educate teachers capable of nurturing responsible citizens for the new republic (Hayhoe, 2016).

Outside mainland China, another thread of LAE development is linked to other parts of the Greater China area, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. With the efforts of previous faculty members and alumni, LAE colleges and universities were rebuilt to revive the programs of former Christian universities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. For example, Lingnan University was founded by the alumni of Lingnan University in Guangzhou. In 1951, Chung Chi College was founded in Hong Kong by former faculty and students from the thirteen Protestant Universities in Mainland China, with the specific mission to continue the educational ideals of the 13 Protestant universities in China (P. Ng, 2001). Chung Chi College is now a residential college in the Chinese University of

² Interesting to note that the humanities section of St. John's University was also merged to become part of East China Normal University in Shanghai; Similarly, the Education Department of Lingnan University was merged to become part of today's South China Normal University.

Hong Kong, promoting LAE for whole person development and accommodating students from various departments and faculties across the university (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2022). In Taiwan, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA) founded Tunghai University to inherit and carry on the legacy of the former 13 Christian universities from mainland China (Tunghai University, 2018). Tunghai was established with a special LAE model and has now developed as a private comprehensive university in Taiwan with LAE as its distinctive feature (Tunghai University, 2019).

Founded in 1922, the UBCHEA reached out to all of Asia after 1952 to support whole person education, environmental sustainability, Christian values and interfaith dialogue. The work of the UBCHEA has made possible the flourishing of this integration across Asia. In 2022 the UBCHEA celebrated its centennial and contributions made to promoting whole person education across Asia and beyond with the central value of cultivating well-developed citizens based on their culture and tradition. This practice brings insights for today's higher education models in terms of respecting local culture, resisting the neo-colonial influence of Western models and neglecting their own values and civilizational heritage.

To sum up, the early historical experience of China's Christian universities showed the possibilities of an integration between core values of East Asian civilization and those of Christian traditions in the western world toward a fuller and more responsible humanity. The next section discusses how contemporary higher education institutions developed their current LAE models based on this legacy and heritage.

Current Liberal Arts Modes in Contemporary Universities

This section brings findings from an empirical study, a case study of three institutions which inherited the legacy of the former Christian universities (Mou, 2022). With the aim of exploring the LAE development in the contemporary universities related to the legacy and heritage of former Christian universities, the study purposefully selected three case institution as its focus: Lingnan University in Hong Kong, Tunghai University in Taiwan, and Yuanpei College at Peking University in mainland China. The three universities all have their historical roots in the former Christian universities. As mentioned above, Lingnan University is linked to the former Lingnan in Guangzhou, and Tunghai was founded by the UBCHEA to carry on the traditions of the former 13 Christian universities in mainland China. Yuanpei College is situated within Peking University which inherited the campus of Yenching University and integrated many academic programs from Yenching.

This study explores LAE in these three institutions in Chinese contexts to see how their LAE is designed and implemented toward whole person cultivation by nurturing students as responsible citizens with the capabilities needed for the uncertain future of the 21st century. The study adopts a mixed methods design, using data such as curriculum documents, interviews with administrators and faculty members, and surveys of students and alumni. By examining how universities design and adapt LAE models into their social and cultural contexts, the study found that the three universities integrated cultural tradition and social factors into their LAE, so as to form a higher education ideal with a focus on the value of person-making or whole person development rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. There are also differences in LAE in the three societies with Yuanpei influenced by the socialist context in Mainland China, Lingnan situated in the practically oriented cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong, and greater emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and the influence of Christian tradition in Tunghai, situated in Taiwan.

Following the common model of broad knowledge, residential learning, close student-faculty relationships, small-class teaching, and extra-curricular activities, the LAE in the three institutions constitutes an educational philosophy

and mode of learning focusing on mentorship experience and an experiential process, which prepares students for future uncertainties with a sense of responsibility and capabilities both for personal flourishing and broader sustainable development. This educational philosophy and mode of learning can find its roots in both Western and Confucian learning approaches. Given the massification of higher education, findings from the three institutions indicated that LAE in these Chinese contexts has moved away from the elite status it often held in the past and is offered to the majority of students for the cultivation of abilities needed for the future. It thus contributes to inclusion and social equity in the 21st century. Despite the well-developed models and good intentions, LAE implementation in the three institutions still faces challenges in the educational system due to social perceptions influenced by a focus on university rankings in all three societies.

This section compares the three institutions and their specific features of LAE (see Table 1). The comparisons are from the aspects of history and reform experience, mission and goal, influence from context and tradition, institutional type and students, and LAE model and funding support.

Table 1 Comparison of Yuanpei, Lingnan, and Tunghai and Their LAE Features

	Yuanpei	Lingnan	Tunghai
History & reform	1952: Christian LAE Yenching University dissolved and merged with Peking University 2001: Yuanpei Class 2007: Yuanpei College	1952: former Christian Lingnan University closed and merged with other universities 1967: Lingnan College founded by alumni 1999: Lingnan University promoting LAE	1955: Tunghai University as a Christian LAE university; 2008: Poya School to revive LAE tradition
Mission & goal	Cultivate a sound personality, with independent views; Openness & inclusion	Whole person education, all-round excellence; Education for service	Holistic education; skills & moral standards; a free person in knowledge and a servant leader; Truth, Faith, Deed

Influence from context and tradition	Campus of Yenching University; whole person education from former President Cai Yuanpei; socialist ideology	former Lingnan University; modified LAE with professional balance in the cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong	Legacy from 13 Christian Universities, and support from the UB; Six Arts model from Confucian tradition
Institutional type and students	Residential college within Peking University, a top research university; top students from CEE	Small-sized public university in Hong Kong; At the lower end of choice for students among 8 public universities	Comprehensive private university with a Poya school on LAE; Private university as a second choice for Taiwan students
LAE model and funding support	Common model of LAE in Yuanpei College. University students with a general education curriculum. Sufficient funding, sharing resources from across the Peking university	Common model of LAE across the university; government funding and public support, based on evaluation of research output	Common model with Confucian elements such as the Six Arts and family system; funding from donations and external support.

History and reform experience. The three institutions all have a historical connection with the former Christian universities, but the current LAE started in the past few decades as a revival of their LAE or whole person education tradition. Peking University, where Yuanpei College is situated, inherited the campus and some academic programs from Yenching University, a former Christian University with a strong liberal arts tradition (Ng & Ng, 2023). Lingnan University was established in 1967 with support from the alumni of the former Christian Lingnan University in Guangzhou. Tunghai University was founded to inherit the legacy of the 13 Christian universities which were closed in mainland China in the early 1950s during higher education reorganization. Although the three institutions could all be related to the former Christian universities, which adapted American LAE to the Chinese context (Mou, 2020), their current LAE is a kind of reform or rethinking of the LAE of the past. The similarity in the reform process is that they are promoted by a senior administrator taking a key role, either a dean or a president. Starting from the Yuanpei class in 2001, Yuanpei has been developed into a liberal arts undergraduate residential college within Peking University. The development of the LAE model is dependent on the dean's insights and vision. Lingnan was upgraded into a

university in the 1990s and chose to enhance its LAE features through the advocacy and vision of former presidents. Tunghai established a Poya School in 2008 with the goal of restoring the lost features of LAE from its early years with the support from university administrators, including the vice president and the dean of the Poya School, and financial support from alumni.

Mission and goal. The three institutions all have a focus on cultivating the whole person for their social contexts, which is reflected in their mission and motto. The nuanced difference is related to their traditions and social contexts. Yuanpei's mission is to cultivate a sound personality with independent views. Its motto is openness and inclusion. Lingnan is devoted to whole person education for all-around excellence. Its motto is education for service. As for Tunghai, it is committed to a holistic education for nurturing a free person with knowledge, skills, and moral standards. Its motto is "truth, faith, deed," which reflects its Christian background.

Influence from context and tradition. The three institutions have their special features of LAE related to their tradition, culture, and social contexts. Yuanpei College was named after the previous president of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei, who advocated the educational principle of "freedom of thought, inclusivity of ideas," a form of LAE with Chinese characteristics and the specific features of Peking University. Yuanpei is building its LAE in the context of Chinese socialism. Its statement of goals emphasizes LAE with Chinese characteristics. Yuanpei is planning to build social internship programs in its practice bases which are in remote provinces across the country. This internship opportunity aims to cultivate students' social responsibility and the sense of contributing to the country. The term Yuanpei uses for the goals of education is a talented person, a person with skills and talents who can contribute to the socialist society and the building of the nation. Besides, Yuanpei emphasizes socialist theories and values through political courses, which serve as the foundation of its LAE. For Lingnan, it has a special feature of social service. This spirit, carried on from the former Christian university, features passion, loyalty, perseverance, openness to different ideas and cultures, and a readiness to serve. Also, by making efforts to prepare students for professional work and enhancing its research output, Lingnan emphasizes its commitment to quality whole person education in the cosmopolitan city of

Hong Kong. Tunghai University has the feature of cultivating students with social responsibility and a spirit of service, with the student labour program system, borrowed from American LAE colleges, Berea College and Antioch College. This program fosters volunteerism and develops students' sense of social responsibility by carrying out environmental services through regular tasks on campus in their daily lives. In its mission, Tunghai specifically mentions its origin as a Christian university and an education with Christian spiritual elements. Also, it mentions the whole person, which combines pioneering service attitudes with the traditional Chinese intellectual spirit of all-around development. In its goal, Tunghai uses the term servant leader which can find its origin in Christianity. Both Lingnan and Tunghai emphasized the whole person and the perspective of the person, both of which are rooted in Confucianism and Chinese culture. In Yuanpei, the socialist view of talents is more explicit in the meaning of the whole person.

Institutional type and students. Although the three institutions are situated in Chinese contexts, they differ vastly in their approach and student population. Yuanpei is a residential LAE college in a top public research university in mainland China. Lingnan is one of the eight public universities in Kong Hong. In its scale, it is one of the smallest. Developed from a small Christian LAE university, Tunghai has expanded into a comprehensive university with a student body of 17,000. The Poya School was established within Tunghai to implement an intensive LAE model and revive its LAE tradition. Regarding the student population, they have students of very different backgrounds, both in social and academic aspects. Students in Yuanpei are the highest achieving students, and recruitment is predominantly based on the national College Entrance Examination (CEE). Tunghai recruits average students in Taiwan because students usually give priority to public universities over private ones. Lingnan, as the smallest institution in Hong Kong, is sometimes the last choice of local students. Both in Tunghai and Lingnan, students are not from the top level in terms of entry examinations or academic achievement in high school.

LAE model and funding support. The three institutions have similar LAE models with the overall focus of five aspects mentioned earlier from curriculum to extracurricular activities, with a new feature added in – internationalization. The difference lies in how the LAE is organized within the university and the

organizational structure. Yuanpei is a school within Peking university, which has parallels with other departments in the first two years before students choose a major. At the time of enrollment, students could apply for either Yuanpei or other major programs and departments. On the administrative level, Yuanpei students are regarded as an experimental group, which studies in parallel with students from other programs and departments. Yuanpei has a student residential building that accommodates Yuanpei students for four years. The general education center at the university level coordinates the general education curriculum. Tunghai has an intensive LAE model confined within the Poya School, and an extensive model that reaches across the university. At Tunghai, Poya School students still belong to their major programs and departments with the LAE study at the Poya School being an extra resource for students and an extra workload as well. Besides, Tunghai integrates models and practices from traditional Chinese education such as the Six Arts and the family system into its LAE model at the Poya School. In Tunghai, a general education center implements the general education curriculum and electives at the university level. With a different organizational structure from Yuanpei and Tunghai, Lingnan, as an LAE university, is implementing its LAE for all students in the university. It also has a general education center managing core curriculum and electives.

LAE is an education model that involves several aspects. The implementation of these aspects needs funding. For example, small-class size means the teaching will need more instructors. Residential learning requires facilities and resources, both software and hardware. Activities need both budget and connections. The three institutions have different funding sources to support their LAE. As a school, Yuanpei receives funding from Peking University which received substantive funding from the government based on its status in Project 985, Project 211, and the recent Double First-Class Project. Tunghai University in its early years had abundant funding from the UBCHEA. After the 1970s, Tunghai had to rely on tuition and other sources. The Poya School at Tunghai previously relied on funding from the alumni and external sponsors in the early years, but now its main funding resources are from Tunghai University as an integrated school. Lingnan, as a public university in Hong Kong, receives funding from the University Grants Committee (UGC). The funding is mainly

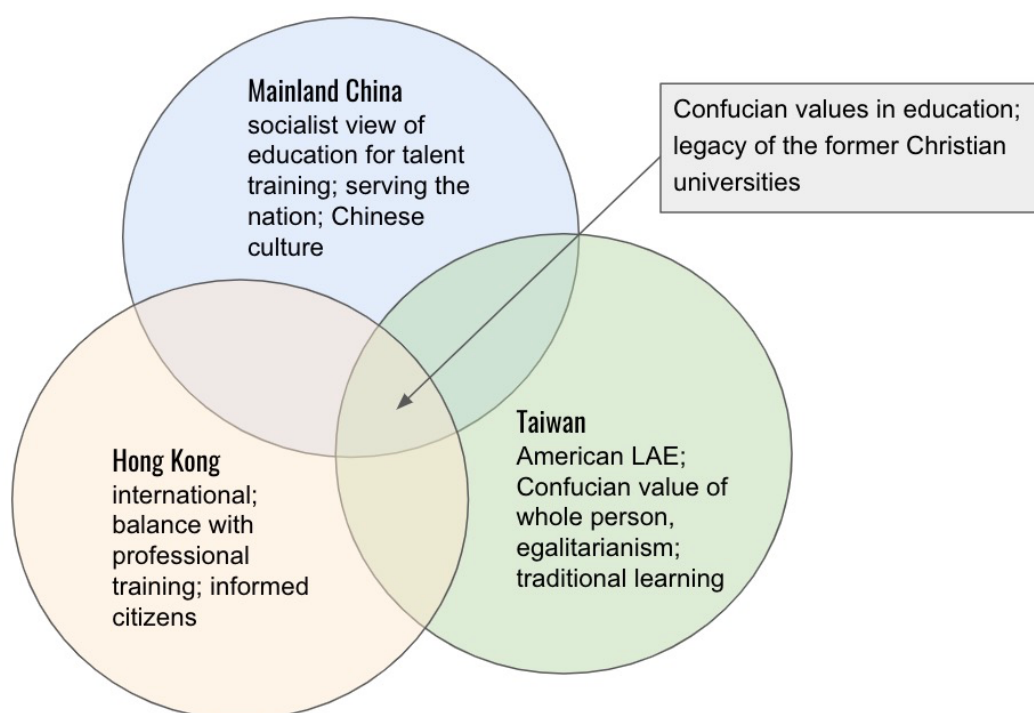
based on research output, which puts Lingnan in a disadvantaged position compared with other comprehensive research universities.

Influenced by local contexts, the LAE models have some differences in their goals, missions, curriculum, and learning mode design. For example, LAE at Yuanpei is committed to cultivating talented people for the building and development of the socialist society in mainland China, while a citizen with critical thinking and professional skills is the focus of Lingnan's LAE in the cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong. By incorporating both Christian and Confucian traditions in its LAE, Tunghai cultivates students as whole persons with a spirit of service for Taiwan society. Through the concept of LAE, they are expressing an ideal of higher education focusing on the whole person (especially for Lingnan and Tunghai), with a deep connection to the Chinese cultural tradition of the person, a well-educated person, who is self-developed in an all-round way with the social responsibility for serving the public good. During the implementation, the LAE modes are contributing to the aspects of capabilities, which are intended to promote substantive freedom to *be* and *do* (capabilities) and achieve forms of being and action that are worth valuing (functionings) (Spreafico, 2013). For example, curriculum, pedagogy, and residential learning are all contributing to the all-around development of a sound character with problem-solving skills. Most notably, the LAE experience provides an opportunity for experiments and experiences that prepare them for future uncertainties with confidence and courage. Interestingly, Tunghai also integrated the traditional learning model of the Six Arts³ and other elements from Chinese culture, such as the family system, into its LAE, together with the labour program borrowed from American LAE, to cultivate full development of a person and nurture character formation and responsibility. It has been emphasized that the in-person connection and the companionship through small classes, mentorship, and activities provide a great process for developing capabilities that cannot easily be nurtured through virtual or online formats. It is also worth noting that LAE or whole person cultivation in the Chinese context has moved away from the elite orientation that was common in the past and is being developed into an educational ideal for ordinary people and average students in the 21st century, which promotes inclusion and social equity.

³ rites (*li* 礼), music (*yue* 乐), archery (*she* 射), charioteering (*yu* 御), literacy (*shu* 书), and numeracy (*shu* 数).

Despite these successful experiments, LAE implementation faces challenges in each of the social contexts where there is an emphasis on research output and university rankings. Overall, leaders in the three institutions implemented LAE following global trends and integrated it with local cultural traditions and values of an ideal higher education focusing on the cultivation of the whole person (ideal citizen). Figure 1 highlights the distinctive features of the three cases.

Figure 1: LAE in Three Institutions in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan



Moving Forward by Looking Back into the Cultural Tradition – Confucian Humanism through the Lens of the SDGs

When discussing LAE in Greater China, one cannot overlook Confucian humanism. Regarding the relationship between LAE and Confucian humanism, a central question is often asked about the contemporary and/or universal significance of Confucian humanism. A quick and easy answer would be that, compared with Western humanism, Confucian humanism explicitly advocates a harmony between human beings and nature, as indicated in its well-known

notion of “tian-ren-he-yi” (天人合一) and thus an explicit expression of care about the natural environment. Nevertheless, the notion of “tian-ren-he-yi” could have multiple meanings; in Chinese, “tian” literally means “heaven” or “the sky” and could be interpreted as meaning truth or the order of nature in a metaphysical sense, or moral decrees following an ethical reasoning. When associating with the natural world, it is more reasonable to be taken as a myriad of things in the larger cosmos as well as the interrelations among them, following cosmological thinking.

An early clue to such cosmological thinking is found in the pre-Confucian scholar, Shi Bo, who lived in the Western Zhou period (1066-771 B.C.E.), and elaborated on “*he*”: “harmony (*he*) is indeed productive of things. But sameness does not advance growth. Smoothing one thing with another is called harmony. For this reason, things come together and flourish” (Li, 2006, p. 584). Such cosmological thinking is explicitly articulated in the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

Only those who are the most sincere can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature, they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things. If they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (Tu, 2001, p. 249)

Obviously, this excerpt addresses the interrelations between nature and humans, and the idea that humans and nature flourish together, although Tu Weiming observed that “for more than a century this idea had been regarded as an archaic irrelevance in cultural China” (Tu, 2001, p. 249).

Wang Yangming (1472-1529) made such cosmological thinking even more explicit with his ontological assertion that the ability to strike a sympathetic resonance with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad of things is a defining characteristic of being human, and offered a series of concrete examples:

When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity

(ren) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an ‘inability to bear’ their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones. (Tu, 2001, pp. 246–247)

These cited examples clearly advocate unity or “forming one body” among the myriad things in the natural world, which in turn entails a holistic bond among and a fundamental care about myriad things in the natural world. Indeed, William Theodore de Bary has observed, “Chinese and Confucian culture, traditionally, was about settled communities living on the land, nourishing themselves and the land” (De Bary, 1998, p. 32).

Then, how could we discern Confucian ecology in a clear way from such cosmological thinking, and more importantly, how can we interpret and reinvent Confucian ecological ideas in contemporary terms? As Tu Weiming observed, Confucian ecological ideas have been long overlooked. For this purpose, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) appear to be a good fit in terms of serving as an analytical lens for this purpose. Arguably, there are significant parallels identified between the goals of humanist education (a core part in LAE) and the SDGs: humanism and in particular Confucian humanism fundamentally serve to stimulate and inspire students to determine what humans are meant to do and what human society is meant to be (De Bary as cited in Chung, 2016), while the SDGs are designed to be a blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for humans (Zha, 2022). The SDGs or global goals comprise

a collection of 17 interlinked goals⁴ accompanied by 169 specific targets meant to advance those goals in concrete ways (United Nations, 2022). These SDGs may be clustered roughly into three thematic domains: 1) respecting life and civilization for a dignified living (e.g., SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 16); 2) achieving a sustainable social and economic development (e.g., SDGs 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17); and 3) maintaining the harmony between humans and nature (e.g., SDGs 13, 14, 15) (Zha, 2022).

Applying the SDGs to Confucian cosmological ideas, parallels and compatibilities can be identified, which in turn helps shed light on Confucian ecological reasoning. Naturally, one tends to think such parallels and compatibilities exist between Confucian ideas and those SDGs that call for maintaining the harmony between humans and nature. While this is obviously true, the manifestations of analogue have essentially gone beyond this thematic domain and extended into other domains as well. For example, Confucius stated “eating coarse rice, drinking cold water, and with bent arm for a pillow—there is also happiness amidst these [...]” (*Analects* 7.15) (Khu et al., 1996, p. 102). Furthermore, “Regarding rice, he did not loathe the whiteness. Regarding meat, he did not loathe the fineness”; “Although there may be plenty of meat, he did not eat more meat than rice”; “Although his rice, vegetables and soup were plain and coarse, he would always offer them in sacrifice before eating, as formally as when fasting for a sacrificial ceremony” (*Analects* 10.8) (Khu et al., 1996, pp. 152–153). Here, Confucius was advocating that one should be content with a simple life; besides, every food item should be given full consideration from both mind and body: sensuous, emotional, and intellectual. Therefore, food is not merely consumed, but a source of appreciation and aesthetic enjoyment of what has been served. Such an advocacy could fit well

⁴ (1) End poverty in all its forms everywhere, (2) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, (3) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, (4) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, (5) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, (6) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, (7) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, (8) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, (9) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, (10) Reduce inequality within and among countries, (11) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, (12) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, (13) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, (14) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, (15) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, (16) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and (17) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

with SDG 12 “ensure sustainable consumption patterns,” and in particular SDG 12.3 “control per capita food waste and reduce food losses.”

Confucius addressed not only the ritual attitude that one should apply to food provision but also the proper attention that one should pay to food quality and safety. “Rice which had fermented and soured, and fish and meat which were spoiled—he did not eat. Off-coloured materials, he did not eat. Off-flavoured materials, he did not eat. Improperly cooked materials—he did not eat. Out-of-season materials—he did not eat. Not properly cut-up materials—he did not eat. Without the correct sauce—he did not eat”; “Food without ginger—he did not eat much. Meat that has been offered in public sacrificial ceremonies—he did not keep overnight. Meat used for family sacrificial ceremonies—he did not keep over three days; beyond three days, he did not eat it” (*Analects* 10.8) (Khu et al., 1996, p. 152). These quotations can be interpreted to mean that special attention needs to be paid to food quality, like the look, the smell, the taste, the quantity of the food, and to the right time of eating—in order to make sure of food safety. This idea of Confucius is well linked to SDG 2 “achieve food security and improved nutrition,” and in particular SDG 2.1 “ensure access by all people....to safe, nutritious and sufficient food.”

While Confucian ecology denotes an appreciation of what nature serves us, as manifested in the above quotations, it more importantly stresses the human responsibility and behaviour to nurture and conserve nature that is friendly and sustainable. In this regard, Mengzi (Mencius) asserted,

If the seasons of husbandry be not interfered with, the grain will be more than can be eaten. If close nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds, the fishes and turtles will be more than can be consumed. If the axes and bills enter the hills and forests only at the proper time, the wood will be more than can be used. When the grain and fish and turtles are more than can be eaten, and there is more wood than can be used, this enables the people to nourish their living and mourn for their dead, without any feeling against any. This condition, in which the people nourish their living and bury their dead without any feeling against any, is the first step of royal government. (*Mengzi*, Liang Hui Wang I) (Mengzi, 1885).

In this scene, agriculture, husbandry and fishery in compliance with the seasons would help conserve nature and lead to economic and social prosperity, and Mencius essentially set it as the condition for a benevolent government. This scene could be linked to multiple SDGs, including SDG 1 “end poverty,” SDG 2 “end hunger,” SDG 3 “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,” SDG 14.4 “effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing,” and SDG 16 “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.”

By the same token, Xunzi linked this idea explicitly to the requirement for being a sage-king and, as such, he stated:

These are the regulations of a sage-king: When the grasses and trees are flowering and abundant, then axes and hatchets are not to enter the mountains and forests, so as not to cut short their life, and not break off their growth. When the turtles and crocodiles, fish and eels are pregnant and giving birth, then nets and drugs are not to enter the marshes, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth. Plow in the spring, weed in the summer, harvest in the fall, and store in the winter. These four activities are not to miss their proper times, and then the five grains will not be depleted, and the common people will have a surplus to eat. Be vigilant in the seasonal prohibitions concerning ponds, rivers, and marshes, and then turtles and fish will be fine and plentiful, and the common people will have a surplus to use. Cutting and nurturing are not to miss their proper times, and then the mountains and forests will not be barren, and the common people will have surplus materials. (Ivahoe & van Norden, 2001, p. 268)

Hence, the Confucian anthropocentrism advocates taking active responsibility for preserving nature, rather than simply enjoying and appreciating what nature offers us. These rules go nicely with SDG 2.4 “ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production”; SDG 8 “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth”; SDG 12.2 “achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources”; SDG 12.8 “ensure that

people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature”; and SDG 17 “strengthen the means of implementation”.

Through the lens of the SDGs, we might be able to reimagine the contemporary significance of Confucian humanism, and in particular its fit with an Anthropocene epoch, in which human impact on the Earth’s ecosystem has gone beyond what the Earth could recover of itself, and in turn affects human life. Connecting to the SDGs, there might be several features characterizing Confucian ecology. First, Confucian ecology celebrates diversity and a harmony within diversity, which is believed to nurture a lively world, while sameness without adequate difference can only lead to a dead end. In parallel, SDG 2.5 aspires to “maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species”; and SDG 15.9 aims to “integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes.” Secondly, Confucian ecology heightens gratitude and an appreciation of what nature offers us, and embeds such a sensation in human ethical perfection, through forming sensuous, emotional, and intellectual bonds with nature, e.g., associating care for nature to filial piety: “To fell a single tree, or kill a single animal, not at the proper season, is contrary to filial piety” (斷一木, 杀一兽, 不以其时, 非孝也) (Confucius as quoted in *Liji* or *The Book of Rites*, Ji Yi) (Confucius, 1885) or with a benevolent government or a sage-king (ref. quotations above from Mengzi and Xunzi). This stress distinguishes Confucian anthropocentrism from that of others. Lastly and relatedly, Confucian ecology advocates a kind of androcentrism in which humans are active participants in the cosmos with ethical responsibility to nurture and maintain nature. This is significantly different from other androcentric perspectives that see nature as serving human needs (Bai, 2004). In sum, the values embedded in Confucian ecological ideas are highly related to those held up by the SDGs, and through the lens of the SDGs their contemporary and universal significance can be brought out and applied to the development of whole persons.

Conclusion

LAE, as a global model of higher learning has been well developed in non-Western contexts. A prominent example is the LAE models developed in Chinese historical and current universities. By bringing together historical research, current experimentations, and future perspectives, this paper has summarized the LAE in the Greater China area and discussed its prospects for a further contribution to humanity by drawing on Confucian classical values. With the contribution from missionaries and traditional and modern educators, LAE from a Western model has been adapted well to Chinese contexts and echoes with the cultural heritage from ancient China. The current universities, with their well-developed models are carrying this forward. The models are well adapted to the Chinese social contexts with a common root in Confucianism for whole person cultivation; they are also integrated into local social contexts, such as Lingnan situated in the practically oriented international city of Hong Kong, Tunghai situated in Taiwan with greater emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and the influence of Christian tradition, and Yuanpei influenced by the socialist context in Mainland China. Looking forward, Confucian thought on education of a whole person and the concept of sustainable development can contribute to global understanding and a model or philosophy of LAE for sustainable development. This can be done by bringing such values as Tian Ren He Yi and harmony, into the goal of whole person development and global citizen cultivation.

LAE is neither a historical relic, nor a uniquely Western idea, but an education for the overall development of engaged citizens, which has common ground in various societies and has deep roots in many traditions (Altbach, 2016). In the Chinese contexts, the current LAE has already discarded its former elite status in the age of mass or universal higher education (Mou, 2022). It focuses on the cultivation of whole persons by involving students from various backgrounds, especially those from under privileged backgrounds, and could contribute to the current quest for equity diversity and inclusion. Moreover, with the exploration of local values and promotion of indigenous knowledge and views of excellence, the consideration of LAE in non-Western contexts contributes to the decolonization of education models and opens up the bright future of an equitable diversified and inclusive world for life in a post pandemic period.

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