Wisdom and Education as Practical Ethics: Contextualising Chinese Wisdom and Ethical Tradition

智慧与教育作为实践伦理：
中国智慧和伦理传统的情境化

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the approach of our investigation into the Chinese wisdom tradition and its role in developing a code of ethics in pivotal areas of social lives. The aim of our investigation is to contextualise Chinese wisdom and ethical traditions to inform those who are interested or engaged in a "dialogue" with China, regarding the dynamics and key strands of the tradition for their reference in dealing with this cross-cultural dialogue.

Key words: Chinese wisdom traditions, practical ethics, contextualisation

1. Introduction

The Chinese wisdom tradition has a great focus on codes of ethics. Yet it can be problematic to say that China is an ethical society (Xie, 2017), as such a claim may lead to an over-simplified, static perspective on Chinese society and tradition, ignoring its diversity, tensions, and transformation. In fact, the moral authority of wisdom has developed, its role as a code of ethics being strengthened or diminished, by interactions among key factors in its context. So it is necessary to adapt a contextualised interactive perspective to see how Chinese wisdom and ethical traditions were constructed and changed in response to various social, economic and cultural developments.

Such a perspective is crucial to those who are interested or engaged in a "dialogue" with China and who need to understand the essence and dynamics of the Chinese wisdom and ethical traditions. Such understandings may help them set up appropriate goals and strategies to ensure the success of their cross-cultural communication. [1]

2. Contextualising Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition

Tradition is related to change in a way as the American anthropologist Nelson H. H. Graburn has put it:

A consciousness of tradition arose primarily only in those historical situations where people were aware of change. Tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost. (Nelson H. H. Graburn, 1997/2001)

According to Graburn, tradition also exists in change: whether it's change of time or domains of social life, or whether a tradition remained intact, or exhausted and lost, or handed on with varying degrees of change in situations of change, there always exist two types of power, i.e. tradition and change, whose interaction defines or redefines the tradition. Thus tradition is contextualised in situations of change, and contextualizing a tradition can be a way to bring to light relevant factors from its context and their interactions to show the essence and dynamics of the tradition.

In the Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition which was rooted in an understanding of the world and rules of social life other than the belief and rules of God formulated in systems of religious ethics, contextualisation was the basic way to construct its ethical principles. This process can be traced back to the 8th century B.C.E. when China was undergoing the severe social unrest of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.).

While the early philosophers ascribed different types of wisdom and talents of the sages to a legendary peaceful social order, it was Confucius (and his followers) who first explored the moral value of the sages and brought it into domains of daily social life. This gave rise to the moral conception of *Junzi* (君子)…
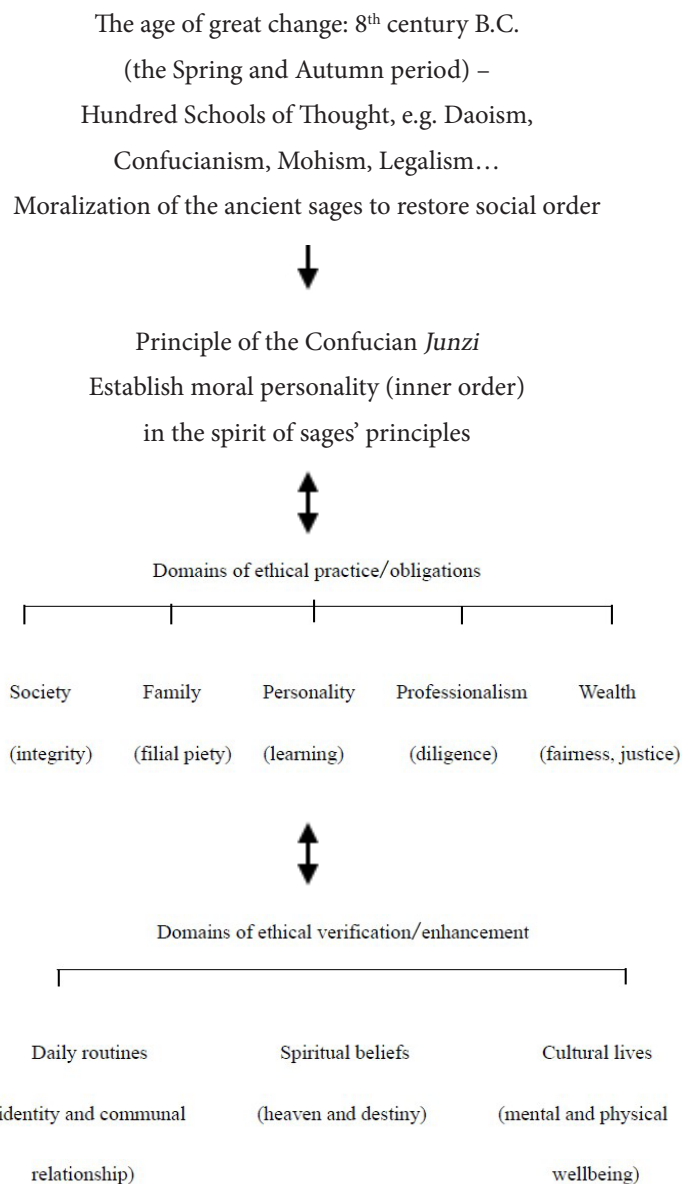
It was then that early philosophers such as Laozi and Confucius appealed to the ancient sages' wisdom to restore the social order. Hence the great virtue of wisdom (圣, *shèng*, be thoroughly knowledgeable) and those possessing this quality (圣人, *shèngrén*, sages) provided the primary moral power to rescue the volatile, disintegrating society.

While the early philosophers ascribed different types of wisdom and talents of the sages to a legendary peaceful social order, it was Confucius (and his followers) who first explored the moral value of the sages and brought it into domains of daily social life. This gave rise to the moral conception of *Junzi* (君子), namely, a lord-like man or a noble man who practiced the moral virtues of the sages unremittingly in all aspects of his life. Accordingly, ethical principles for different domains of social life were prescribed and categorised in the light of the *Junzi*'s pursuit of moral perfection.

As sacrifice to ancestors and punitive expeditions were endowed with ritual meaning legitimating the moral power and justice of the monarch in sages' time, such sense was also given to the *Junzi*'s symbolic activities related to identity and communal relationship, spiritual beliefs, as well as mental and physical well-being. By carrying out such activities in the light of ethical principles, the *Junzi*'s moral sense was intrinsically verified and enhanced.

The contextualisation of the early Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition brought about its primary construction of ethical principles is shown in the following outline:

The primary construction of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition

The legendary age of sages

(Establishment of initial social order)

↓

The age of great change: 8th century B.C.

(the Spring and Autumn period) –

Hundred Schools of Thought, e.g. Daoism, Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism…

Moralization of the ancient sages to restore social order

↓

Principle of the Confucian *Junzi*

Establish moral personality (inner order)

in the spirit of sages' principles

↕

Domains of ethical practice/obligations

Society	Family	Personality	Professionalism	Wealth
(integrity)	(filial piety)	(learning)	(diligence)	(fairness, justice)

↕

Domains of ethical verification/enhancement

Daily routines	Spiritual beliefs	Cultural lives
(identity and communal relationship)	(heaven and destiny)	(mental and physical wellbeing)

This top-down hierarchical structure was rooted in the ancient sages' wisdom regarding order in the world, which was moralized to seek for ways to ease the social unrest in the following period, when this moral power was personified as the *Junzi* in the Confucian moral context, and further contextualised as ethical principles in the light of the *Junzi*'s practice of his moral obligations in the domains of social and spiritual life. So this process of contextualisation of the early Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition brought about ten major strands of ethical principles as outlined below:

Ten strands of ethical principles of the Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition:

1. principle of wisdom: Moral power/moral leadership

2. principle of Junzi: Moral practice- principles and methods

3. principle of society: Social order- principles and methods

4. principle of family: Family order- principles and methods

5. principle of personality: Self-fulfillment (inner order)- principles and methods

6. principle of professionalism: Fulfillment of career life- principles and methods

7. principle of wealth: Social fairness and justice- principles and methods

8. principle of relationship: Self-identification and perception of communal relationship

9. principle of destiny: Harmonization of heaven and earth

10. principle of cultivation: Perfection of spirit and body

These strands of ethical principles covered the main areas of social life concerning how a man of integrity acted to fulfill his responsibilities in line with the social and individual moral order. It laid the foundation for further contextualisation of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition, as well as ways to observe the essence and dynamics of the tradition in various situations of change. For instance, the hierarchical structure of moral authority was rooted in the sense of order and how it was established. So it can be contextualised in many other social structures, such as:

Structure: Moral hierarchy	Politics/government	Family/clan	Business
Sages	Emperor/head of state	The elders	Decision makers
↓	↓	↓	↓
Junzi	Ministers/leading cadre	Parents(male)	Middle managers
↓	↓	↓	↓
Petty men	Common people	Women and children	Lower employees

The contextualisation of moral power structure

While this reduplication of moral authority tended to stabilize social structures, it also embedded intrinsic tensions: those on the top of the structures also faced moral pressure, in which the loss of moral leadership might easily lead to the collapse of society. In such cases, according to Mencius (372-298 B.C.E.), the most important follower of Confucius and one of the founders of Confucianism, the breakdown and disobedience of the lower classes were morally justifiable and righteous.

Even inside the moral structure there existed basic tensions among the sages, the *Junzi* and petty men (*Xiaoren*): if *Junzi* persistently pursued the sage's moral principle, and the petty men diligently practiced *Junzi's* teaching, eventually there would be no difference between them. But this might prove impossible and fundamentally contradictory to the Confucian moral and the world order. Or else, like Daoists suspected, the Confucian *Junzi* was merely hypocritical and ineffectual.

Moreover, in the Daoist perspective on the sage tradition, the order of the nature (道, *Dào*, the Way) was the highest principle of the world and the ancient sages' wisdom lay in that they let the natural order work without disturbance. In other words, the moral principles of the Confucian *Junzi* were basically nonsense, being unnatural, and the source of disorder.

The coexistence of the competing wisdom and ethical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and later on Buddhism resulted in: a) the institutionalisation of Confucianism as the official moral ideology of the Empire, from the 2nd century B.C.E., and b) the emergence of Neo-Confucianism which integrated important elements of the other two into its epistemology and methodology, thus resorting to nature for moral verification and enhancement, thus

empowering an average person to realize the universal potential of the sages' character, i.e. the combination of great conscience and an ability to practice it. Both cases were milestones in the process of recontextualising Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition as they redefined the tradition in different ways.

Such re-contextualisation became even more intense during the late imperial periods when China had begun large encounters with Western civilizations. On the one hand, such encounters with Western wisdom had greatly

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promoted China's process of modernisation. Accordingly, Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition had experienced a series of revisions to accommodate social progress. One of the most important events was the May 4th New Culture Movement started in 1919, which called on science and democracy to transform Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition. In this new context, the moral imperatives of the Confucian *Junzi* were replaced by Western science and democracy, which were personified as Mr. Sai (science) and Madame De

(democracy). The China-centered ideology based on the hierarchical structure of moral authority was undermined by new ideologies of cultural pluralism and dialogues between civilisations. Its impacts can be seen in the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980's, which launched the turn toward a market economy.

On the other hand, the official Confucianism had combined nationalism, populism and authoritarianism to strengthen its role as the leading ideology in the context of a declining social, economic and cultural order. So at the same time as Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition had experienced significant transformations, China had also seen movements such as "back to the ancients", "imperial renaissance", "national studies" (studies of the ancient Chinese civilisation especially Confucianism), which emerged one after another in social and political spheres in order to maintain the official ideology.

Education has always been a key factor of the Chinese context. Confucius was established as the founder of an educational tradition, whose goal was to nurture the quality of *Junzi* by practicing ethical principles and mastering critical talents (i.e., the Confucian six arts). So moral cultivation and skill development had been two goals of education since the very beginning of the Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition. But just as with other traditional structures, the moral-skill construction is not free of tension: as new knowledge and views of the world are brought into play, the goals and means of education can be fundamentally challenged. So education has kept playing critical roles in the reconstruction of the Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition.

Based on the above discussions, a few points can be concluded here: a) the Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition was rooted in an understanding of the world and rules of social

life, with contextualisation serving as the way that it was constructed and/or reconstructed to deal with situations of change; b) the moral structure, ethical principles and contexts to practice in line with the principles are key factors that are in constant interactions to define or redefine the tradition; c) contextualisation is also a way to understand the essence and dynamics of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition as well as its various impacts in contemporary society.

3. What roles can Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition play today?

As the first Chinese ambassador to the West, Guo Songtao (郭嵩焘, 1818-1891 C.E.), wrote about his impressions of Europe in his diary (使西纪程, *shǐ-xī-jì-chéng, Journal of the Envoy to the West, 1877-1878*), in which he highly praised Western civilization, and claimed it was the socio-political system beyond its machines and weapons, which had made the West strong and a land of sages (i.e. a land of wealth and good order).

Guo was punished for his words about the West by the Chinese government. Yet he was not the first nor the last to reconsider Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition in a new context. Ironically, such reflections were also rooted in the deep faith of the tradition. The point is, Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition did play an epistemological role here, i.e., namely, the assumption that social prosperity and stability are the highest embodiment of moral principles.

Confucian entrepreneurship is another important case which proves the compatibility of Confucian values and business ethics. In other words, the epistemology and methodology of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition can play a role in a highly comercialised society. Advocating education, diligence and hard-work, valuing highly interpersonal relationships, a positive and optimistic attitude etc., are key characters for business success, and commonly found among Chinese people wherever they are.

The above cases show the heuristic aspects of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition. The knowledge or epistemology driven, contextualised, and interactive construction of the tradition make it durable and adaptable in situations of change. On the other hand, such characteristics might also turn out to be obstacles that prevent forming strong cohesions to purse lofty aims full-faithfully. That's why social enlightenment has been a critical and Herculean task in China. Meanwhile, the top-down, hierarchical moral structure and its reduplications in social life may provoke the development of a conservative ideology, which has led to periodic social reactions that have restricted real breakthroughs.

In the case of "dialogue" with China, Chinese wisdom and tradition can certainly bring about both opportunities and challenges to both sides of the dialogue. As many have pointed out, it is necessary to recognize different Chinas, i.e. to be able to distinguish political, economic, cultural, geographic [dimensions of] China from the conceptual China, so as to avoid hasty conclusions (Kynge, 2006; Kissinger, 2011; Shambaugh, 2008; Vogel, 2011). Yet, one may still need to grasp the essence and key dynamics of the society to dispel possible delusions caused by the volatile profiles of China. Understanding the mechanism of Chinese wisdom and ethical tradition can help to bridge the gaps and amplify our awareness of similarities and differences.

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