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Teaching the Art of Inquiry: Questioning Pedagogy in Traditional Chinese Primers

1. Introduction

From infancy, questioning is the fundamental method through which children explore and understand the world.¹ By school age, this curiosity matures into a critical learning skill and is formally recognised and required by educational frameworks. For example, the Curriculum for Wales emphasises the development of “ambitious and capable learners” who are questioning and enjoy problem-solving.² Despite the institutional endorsement, contemporary education pedagogy prioritises teaching-led questions, while sometimes neglecting the systematic instructions of how children themselves can formulate effective questions.³

This essay aims to bridge this gap by introducing the methodology for teaching questioning in traditional Chinese children’s primers. And by doing so, fostering a transcultural dialogue in education. The central thesis of this essay is that the primers not merely teach questioning in a general sense; they offer guidance on how to cultivate the underlying cognitive abilities essential for inquiry. This instruction empowers children to use questions as a precise tool to search for information effectively.⁴

¹ An infant can question the surrounding environment by certain gestures when its expectations are violated. *The Questioning Child: Insights From Psychology and Education*, ed. By Lucas Payne Butler and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 9–10.

² ‘Developing a vision for curriculum design’, Welsh Government, 10 January 2022 <<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/designing-your-curriculum/developing-a-vision-for-curriculum-design/#curriculum-design-and-the-four-purposes>> [accessed 28 November 2025].

³ Cora Causey and Amelis Spencer, ‘Student-generated Questions: An Exploration of an Instructional Strategy With Young Children’, *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 53 (2024), pp. 1–10 (p.1), doi: 10.1016/j.tsc.2024.101608.

⁴ In this essay, the term “children” refers to individuals under the age of fifteen. This demarcation aligns with traditional Chinese society, where fifteen marked the transition from childhood to adulthood and was the typical upper age limit for primers-based education. For a contemporary comparative perspective, the Curriculum for Wales also targets a similar developmental range, encompassing students from five to sixteen years old in primary and secondary school.

Limin Bai, *Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005), p. 16–18.

‘Introduction to curriculum for Wales guidance’, Welsh Government, 31 January 2024 <<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction-to-curriculum-for-wales-guidance/>> [accessed 28 November 2025].

To clarify the scope of this study, two terms are defined. First, primers. Primers (*mengshu* 蒙書), literally translated as “book for the ignorant”, were educational texts read by children in imperial China before the eighteenth century.⁵ Their purpose was to teach children the ways of living to preserve and recover their unblemished innate nature.⁶ This study primarily focuses on the subgenre of etiquette primers, a genre initially composed by extracting ritual conduct from the *Records on Ritual* (*liji* 禮記), pioneered in the Song dynasty (960–1279) by an eminent philosopher, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).⁷ Second, questioning. While questioning can be applied in multiple functions,⁸ this essay concentrated on its epistemic function. This type of inquiry is an intentional act of asking questions to bridge a knowledge gap or resolve uncertainty.⁹

The following sections will develop the main argument in two parts. Section Two adopts a framework of questioning to generally demonstrate how the instructions in primers teach

⁵ Katherine Ngo, *Unlocking the Treasury: Elementary Learning for Boys in Qing China* (Michigan: Lever Press, 2025), p. 21.

Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers: A Source Book* (Michigan: Lever Press, 2025), p. 4.

⁶ Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 3.

⁷ Primers in pre-modern China have four types based on their function in education: etiquette, vocabulary, cultural literacy, and morality. Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 17, 19.

⁸ Questioning has epistemic function, pragmatic function, social function, to make a point, and to teach, with the initial three functions found in primers.

Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, *Developmental Review*, 49 (2018), pp. 101–20 (p. 102), doi: 10.1016/j.dr.2018.05.002.

The pragmatic function is the use of questions to monitor the flow of conversation among speech participants, such as in greeting, when a speaker either initiates or acknowledges a conversation with another speaker by expressing a gesture. For example, in the *Essential of Daily Etiquette*: “On meeting a Chinese person for the first time, ask their surname by saying “gui xing” (esteemed surname) and ask their name by saying “tai fu” (eminent name).”

Original text: 「初見面之人問姓，曰貴姓，問名，曰台甫。」

Arthur C. Graesser and others, ‘Mechanisms that generate questions’, in *Questions and Information Systems*, ed. by Thomas W. Lauer and others (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), pp. 167–87 (p. 181–182).

Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 303.

The social function refers to questions that are generated to coordinate actions among speech participants, such as when asking permission. For instance, the *Essential of Daily Etiquette* instructs: “Before visiting public servants and teachers, we must ask in advance their working hours. Do not sit and talk for a long time.”

Original text: 「訪公教人員，必先問明其上班鐘點，不可久坐閑談。」

A further instance can be found in the *Rhymed Children's Conduct* (*jieyun youyi* 節韻幼儀), which states “serving one's teacher is similar to serving one's parents; in all matters, one must ask before acting.”

Original text: 「事師如事親，有事必問而後行。」

Arthur C. Graesser and others, ‘Mechanisms that generate questions’, p. 180–181.

Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 296.

Wang Zhiyi 汪志伊, ‘Jieyun youyi’ 節韻幼儀, in *Guoxue jiyao jiaofa juan* 國學輯要教法卷, ed. by Jun Yihao 君藝豪 and Jiao Yuhua 焦玉華, 3 vols (Beijing: minzhu yu jianshe chubanshe, 2015), II, pp. 298–305 (p. 301).

⁹ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 102.

children to ask questions, and highlights the cultivation of two underpinning cognitive skills of effective inquiry. After that, this study culminates with the dual educational possibilities of questioning methodology in primers.

However, it is important to clarify that the primers contain no dedicated chapter on questioning; instructions are instead dispersed across various sections.¹⁰ While this does not yield an explicit, systematic model, these scattered references collectively outline the essential components of the questioning process. The present analysis synthesises them to articulate the underlying pedagogical framework.

2. Questioning Methodology in Primers: A Three-step Framework

This analysis employs the questioning framework established by Samuel Ronfard et al. (2018), which synthesises cross-disciplinary research on the development of children's inquiry from infancy through elementary school.¹¹ The model outlines three interconnected phases: (1) initiation, (2) formulation and expression, and (3) response evaluation and follow-up (Figure 1).¹² The following subsections will use this structure to examine the primers' pedagogical approach. Each subsection will first define a stage of the framework before analysing how the primers cultivated that skill in children.

¹⁰ The instructions on questioning examined in this study are drawn primarily from three thematic categories within the etiquette primers: first, moral principles, such as the chapter on “Reverencing the Self” (*jing shen* 敬身) in *Elementary Learning*; second, daily etiquette instruction, including the section on “Being Attentive” (*jin* 謹) in *Guideline for Learners*, the chapter “Miscellaneous Rites” (*za yi* 雜儀) in *Ritual Poems for Elementary Learning*, and the relevant chapters on school conduct from three primers; third, narratives, such as the sections “Illustrations from Antiquity” (*ji gu* 稽古) and “Exemplary Deeds” (*shan xing* 善行) in *Elementary Learning*.

¹¹ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 103.

¹² It should be clarified that the questioning framework applied in this essay, while retaining the core process outlined by Ronfard et al., has been slightly adapted for two main reasons. First, although certain stages are presented separately in the original model, Ronfard notes that they often operate in conjunction, particularly formulation and expression. Second, the model has been streamlined to align with the pedagogical structure observed in the primers, most notably in the treatment of the response evaluation and follow-up stage.

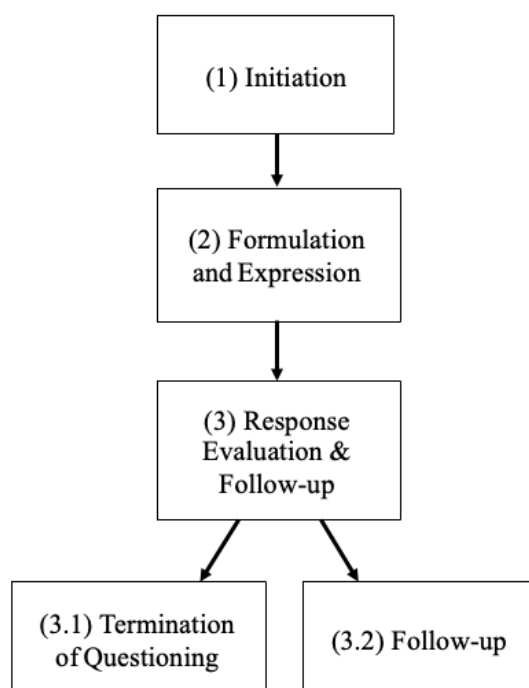


Figure 1. The model of questioning.

2.1 Initiation

The initiation phase involves recognising a gap in one’s knowledge—a moment of uncertainty, a contradiction, or an anomalous event that triggers the need for information.¹³ The primers taught children to be acutely aware of this mental stage and actively initiate questions in response. This pedagogy is evident across dynasties. In the foundational Neo-Confucian primer *Elementary Learning* (*xiaoxue* 小學),¹⁴ Zhu Xi reinforces the value of this self-monitoring by citing a passage from the *Analects* (*lunyu* 論語) on the noble person’s nine cares, one of which is “to reflect whether the self seeks advice when it has doubts.”¹⁵ This principle was still being instilled centuries later, as seen in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911/12)

¹³ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 103.

¹⁴ M. Theresa Kelleher, ‘Back to Basics: Chu Hsi’s Elementary Learning (Hsiao-hsüeh)’, in *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*, ed. by Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (London: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 219–51 (p. 219).

¹⁵ Original text: 「君子有九思。視思明，聽思聰，色思溫，貌思恭，言思忠，事思敬，疑思問，忿思難，見得思義。」 Zhu Xi 朱熹, Chen Xuan 陳選, annotate., ‘yuding xiaoxue jizhu’ 御定小學集註, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), vol. 699, pp. 521–605 (p. 547).

All translation of the *Analects* in this essay were referenced from Watson, 2007. Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 117.

primer *Guideline for Learners* (*dizi gui* 弟子規), which directly instructs students to “make a note when unsure in thinking, and ask the right person for information.”¹⁶

Furthermore, in addition to recognising moments of doubt, the primers help children to develop behavioural self-regulation, which is crucial for initiating appropriate questions. A key part of this self-regulation is inhibitory control, which is the ability to suppress a strong internal impulse or external lure to behave in a more goal-appropriate way, and it is an important cognitive skill in questioning.¹⁷ Primers offer training through two complementary types of instructions. First, inhibiting inappropriate inquiries. The primers trained children to suppress their innate curiosity when it was socially unsuitable. For instance, the directive to “never ask about strange or improper things” from the *Guidelines for Learners* taught children to inhibit a curiosity-driven impulse, thus preventing an impolite question.¹⁸ Second, promoting essential inquiries. Conversely, self-regulation also involved initiating questions in the absence of spontaneous curiosity. In specific social contexts, children were instructed to inhibit hesitancy and proactively seek crucial information. The Song dynasty primer *Ritual Poems for Elementary Learning* (*xiaoxue shili* 小學詩禮), for example, encouraged children to “ask about local laws and customs when entering a country, and ask about taboos when visiting someone.”¹⁹ This encouragement of questioning is rooted in the assurance of proper conduct in an unfamiliar situation and cultivates the attitude of considering others.

Recent research on inhibitory control confirms that this ability can become automatic after sufficient learning of the association between stimuli and stopping.²⁰ This process resonated in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) primary schools, where teachers explained these rules and

¹⁶ Original text: 「心有疑，隨札記，就人問，求確義。」 Translation referenced from Ngo, 2025. Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 276.

¹⁷ Adele Diamond, ‘Executive Functions’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64 (2013), pp. 135–68 (p. 137), doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750.

There are four main cognitive abilities underlying questioning, including metacognition, attention, executive function resources (especially inhibitory control), and the Theory of Mind.

Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 105

¹⁸ Original text: 「邪僻事，絕勿問。」 Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 266.

¹⁹ Original text: 「入境必問禁，入國必問俗，入門必問諱。」

Chen Chun 陳淳, ‘Xiaoxue shili’ 小學詩禮, in *Guoxue jiyao jiaofa juan* 國學輯要教法卷, ed. by Jun Yihao 君藝豪 and Jiao Yuhua 焦玉華, 3 vols (Beijing: minzhu yu jianshe chubanshe, 2015), I, pp. 219–21 (p. 221).

Similar instruction also found in the *Essentials of Daily Etiquette* (*changli juyao* 常禮舉要). Original text: 「入境問禁，入國問俗，入門問諱。」 Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children's Primers*, p. 299.

²⁰ Frederick Verbruggen, and others, ‘The Inhibitory Control Reflex’ in *Neuropsychologia*, 65 (2014), pp. 263–78 (p. 263), doi: 10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2014.08.014.

children were thoroughly familiar with and practised them.²¹ Through this sustained practice, children's thoughts and behaviours were ultimately shaped, enabling them to initiate appropriate questions to seek information effectively.

2.2 Formulation and expression

After identifying the knowledge gap, children would formulate a question and find a way to express it. This stage consists of four sub-components: the identification of information to ask for, question phrasing, identifying the informant, and contextual analysis. This section will focus in detail on the metacognitive process of identifying what to ask, given its significance in fostering open-ended questions, which is a priority in Western educational discourse.²² The other skills will be treated more generally.

When children formulate a question, they have a general sense of what information is sought and what the answer might be. The depth of one's inquiry during question formulation depends on numerous factors, one of which is the level of metacognitive engagement.²³ A cursory search of prior knowledge yields vague questions, whereas a deep, reflective search

²¹ Original text: 「又次爲句讀。堂內榜管氏《弟子職》，亦列數圖示之，日講一圖。次以《孝經》、《小學》教之句讀，令其粗熟。仍爲講說文義，約之人身。」

During the Jiajing period (1521/22–1566/67) of the Ming dynasty, when Gui E 桂萼 (1478–1531) was promoted to the Ministry of Justice, he submitted a memorial to the emperor outlining his views on elementary education. This memorial was later recorded by Zhang Erqi 張爾岐 (1612–1678) in his work *Chit-Chat of Hao'an* (*hao'an xianhua* 蒿菴閒話).

Zhang Erqi 張爾岐 'Hao'an xianhua' 蒿菴閒話, in *Qingdai qianqi jiaoyu lunzhu xuan* 清代前期教育論著選, ed. by Li Guojun 李國鈞, 3 vols (Beijing: renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), I, pp. 220–221 (p. 220).

Limin Bai, *Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China*, p. 92–93.

²² The ability to identify what to ask can be taught using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), a pedagogical model developed by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana in 2011. QFT is a structured, step-by-step process designed to help students generate and refine their own open-ended questions in classroom settings. Through this technique, students develop three core thinking abilities: divergent thinking, convergent thinking, and metacognition.

The QFT process consists of six stages: (1) Introducing a Question Focus and establishing rules for question generation; (2) Producing questions individually or in groups; (3) Categorising questions as open- or closed-ended; (4) Discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each question type and improving them; (5) Prioritising questions, typically selecting three, and justifying the choices; (6) Applying the prioritised questions in learning tasks and reflecting on the process.

Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, *Make Just One Change: Teach Student to Ask Their Own Questions* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2017), p. 15, 20.

Research has demonstrated that after implementing QFT in the classroom, students' question-asking skills show significant improvement. Cora Causey and Amelis Spencer, 'Student-generated Questions: An Exploration of an Instructional Strategy With Young Children', p.9.

²³ In questioning, metacognition considered to be the ability to search reflectively through memory and identify prior knowledge. Samuel Ronfard and others, 'Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development', p. 105.

enables highly targeted formulations.²⁴ A key pedagogical challenge is overconfidence, which can cause children to neglect this deep search, leading them to either pose vague inquiries or forgo questioning altogether due to an unrecognised knowledge gap.²⁵ The primers address this by cultivating intellectual humility—a disposition that promotes deeper metacognitive engagement and counteracts the Dunning-Kruger effect.²⁶ This virtue is instilled through moral instruction that specifically fosters self-interrogation to challenge overconfidence.

For instance, *Elementary Learning* cites the *Analects*' praise of Yan Hui 顏回 (c. 521–481 BCE): “Able but consulting those who lack ability... possessing but seeming to be without, full yet seeming to be empty.”²⁷ This model of humility encourages a proactive questioning stance even when one feels competent, prompting children to internally scrutinise their knowledge by asking, “Although I’m confident about it, maybe the advice from others can offer new insights. Should I think deeply or ask an expert about it?” The Ming dynasty primer, *Extended Wise Sayings* (*zengguang xianwen* 增廣賢文), offers a different, more pragmatic rationale: “For great success in all you do, one must consult Three Elders too.”²⁸

²⁴ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 103–104.

²⁵ Research based on experimental methods has shown that children are capable of monitoring their own uncertainty, that such uncertainty is closely associated with the (perceived) incorrectness of their knowledge or responses, and that they tend to ask for help regarding matters about which they feel less confident. Christine Coughlin, and others, ‘Introspection on uncertainty and judicious help-seeking during the preschool years’, *Developmental Science*, 18.6 (2015), pp. 957–71 (p. 964–965), doi: 10.1111/desc.12271.

²⁶ The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias first described by psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. It refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals with low ability at a task tend to overestimate their own competence.

David Dunning, ‘The Dunning-Kruger effect: On being ignorant of one’s own ignorance’ *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 44 (2011), pp. 247–96 (p. 260) doi: 10.1016/B978-0-12-385522-0.00005-6.

²⁷ Original text: 「曾子曰：『以能問於不能，以多問於寡。有若無，實若虛，犯而不校。昔者吾友嘗從事於斯矣。』友指顏淵也。」

Chen Xuan’s 陳選 (1429–1486) commentary of this sentence is profoundly insightful. He interpreted the mindset of Yan Hui as one who was solely aware of the boundlessness of principle and knowledge, while perceiving no distinction between the self and others. Original text: 「顏子之心，惟知理義之無窮，不見物我之有間。」 Zhu Xi, Chen Xuan, annotate., ‘Yuding xiaoxue jizhu’, p. 559.

²⁸ Original text: 「凡事要好，須問三老。」 Katherine Ngo and Kelly Ngo, *Traditional Chinese Children’s Primers*, p. 229.

In traditional China, the Three Elders (*sanlao* 三老) were virtuous retired officials selected in each county to educate the common people and mediate local disputes. According to the commentary and sub-commentary on “King Wen as Crown Prince” (*wenwang shizi* 文王世子) in the *Records on Ritual*, the term “Three Elders” could refer either to an official title or to a position held by three individuals concurrently.

Original text of Zheng Xuan’s commentary: 「三老五更各一人也，皆年老更事致仕者也。天子以父兄養之，示天下之孝悌也。」 Kong Yingda’s sub-commentary: 「又以三老爲三人，五更爲五人，非鄭義也，今所不取。」 Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 annotate., *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 ed. by Ma Xinmin 馬辛民 (Beijing: Beijing daxue shubanshe, 2000), p. 758, 762.

This instruction directly links successful outcomes to the act of consultation. When children hesitate to ask, this connection incentivises questioning by triggering a self-interrogation about their preparedness: “As the success is interconnected with inquiry, should I ask for more accurate information to complete this task?” In sum, these instructions serve as a powerful corrective to overconfidence. By championing humility, they compel deeper self-interrogation, prompting students to formulate the necessary, targeted questions that a cursory self-assessment would overlook. Moreover, such precise questions, being confined to an explicit domain, are more likely to elicit plausible and useful answers.²⁹

The remaining sub-components of this stage are systematically addressed in a series of etiquette primers from the Ming-Qing period. A section focused on manners in school, found in three different primers, offers practical guidance on question phrasing, informant identification, and contextual analysis.³⁰ The text prescribes a detailed procedure of questioning:

If there is anything in the instruction that one does not fully comprehend, one should first consult the senior students to avoid asking the teacher hastily in a disrespectful manner. If one

As further illustrated in the sub-commentary to the “Records on Music” (*yueji* 樂記) chapter of the same classic, the number “three” here carries dual symbolic meanings, which may denote the three virtues possessed by the Three Elders: uprightness (*zhengzhi* 正直), firmness (*gang* 剛), and gentleness (*rou* 柔), or it may symbolise the Three Luminaries (*san chen* 三辰), namely the sun, moon, and stars, which are the heaven relied on to illuminate all beings, representing the role of Three Elders. Original text: 「三德，謂正直、剛、柔。……《文王世子》注云：「象三辰五星者，義相包矣。」 Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda annotate., *Liji zhengyi*, p. 1327.

²⁹ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 104.

³⁰ The sections dedicated to school conduct within the three primers are as follows: ‘Proprieties for the Schoolhouse’ (*shutang yiye zhi li* 書堂肄業之禮) in *The Ritual for Children* (*tongzi li* 童子禮), ‘Receiving Instructions’ (*shou ye* 受業) in *Essential of Children’s Ritual* (*tongli zhiyao* 童禮知要), and ‘Proprieties for the Schoolhouse’ (*xuetang yiye zhi yi* 學堂肄業之儀) in *Rhymed Children’s Conduct*.

Original text: 《童子禮》「受業于師，必讓年長者居先，序齒而進。受畢，肅揖而退。其所受業，或未通曉，當先叩之年長，不可遽瀆問於師。如欲請問，當整衣斂容，離席前告曰。某于某事未明，某書未通，敢請。先生有答，即宜傾耳聽受。答畢，復原位。」

Tu Xishi 屠羲時, ‘Tongzi li’ 童子禮, in *Guoxue jiyao jiaofa juan* 國學輯要教法卷, ed. by Jun Yihao 君藝豪 and Jiao Yuhua 焦玉華, 3 vols (Beijing: minzhu yu jianshe chubanshe, 2015), II, pp. 227–31 (p. 231).

Original text: 《童禮知要》「受業於師，必讓年長者居先，序齒而進，受畢奉揖而退。其所受業或未通曉，當先叩之年長，不可遽請問於師。如欲請問，當整衣斂容，離席前而告曰某於某事未明，某書未通，敢請先生。有答即宜傾耳聽受，答畢仍復原位。」

Shi Chengjin 石成金, ‘Tongli zhiyao’ 童禮知要, in *Guoxue jiyao jiaofa juan* 國學輯要教法卷, ed. by Jun Yihao 君藝豪 and Jiao Yuhua 焦玉華, 3 vols (Beijing: minzhu yu jianshe chubanshe, 2015), II, pp. 272–78 (p. 277–278).

Original text: 《節韻幼儀》「受業之先後，序齒禮當守。受畢揖退有未知，且問年長友。終非問師莫適從，當整冠而斂容。離席前告曰：某字未識，某義未通。先生有答，傾耳默記胸中。畢則復位，靜專為宗。」

Wang Zhiyin, ‘Jieyun youyi’, p. 303.

wishes to inquire of the teacher, one should ensure their clothes and appearance are tidy, leave their seat and say: ‘I have not understood [this specific point] and have not comprehended [this particular book]; may I kindly request your guidance?’ When the teacher answers, one should listen carefully. Once the question is answered, one should return to the original seat.³¹

This procedure serves a dual educational function: it provides a step-by-step guidance for inquiry while simultaneously instilling a mindset of consideration for others and intellectual humility. In terms of question phrasing, the primer provides a specific script. This model phrasing helps children consider the feelings of the teacher by articulating their intended question clearly, ensuring the informant can understand and deliver a targeted answer. For identifying an informant, children are guided through a cost-benefit consideration that is tempered by the ability to “put themselves in others’ shoes.”³² They learn to prioritise senior students not only because they are a readily available source of information but also out of consideration for the teacher’s limited time and expertise. This decision-making process inherently involves contextual analysis, as it requires an assessment of the entire classroom dynamic. Furthermore, the formal structure of the request, from rising from one’s seat and adjusting appearance to using honorific language, cultivates a humility mindset that prepares the child for active listening and learning from an expert.

Ultimately, this detailed guidance can also be viewed as a method for fostering inhibitory control. It explicitly directs children on what should be done, thereby helping them override initial, unsuitable impulses, such as interrupting the teacher or blurting out a question, and replace them with considered, appropriate conduct.

2.3 Response evaluation and follow-up

Following the receipt of an answer, children face the task of evaluating the information they received.³³ This evaluation is intrinsically shaped by the initial formulation of the question: a deeply considered, targeted question inherently narrows the scope of an appropriate answer,

³¹ Please refer to the previous footnote for original texts. Tu Xishi, ‘Tongzi li’, p. 231.

³² The term “cost-benefit analysis” here refers to the questioner’s effort to formulate a question that constitutes a low-cost, high-value option. This involves balancing several factors: the personal importance of obtaining an answer, the perceived availability and suitability of the informant, the existing social context, and the availability of alternative methods for acquiring the desired information. Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 104.

³³ Samuel Ronfard and others, ‘Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development’, p. 104–105.

thereby facilitating a more straightforward assessment. Conversely, a vague question resulting from a cursory analysis often yields an ambiguous response that is harder to evaluate effectively.³⁴ Based on this assessment, children then strategise their follow-up. They may conclude the inquiry, having acquired sufficient information, or they might disengage from the current informant deemed unlikely to provide further insight, opting instead for autodidactic methods. Alternatively, productive follow-ups can involve restating the original question for clarity, or generating a new, more refined line of inquiry based on the information just received.³⁵

While the primers do not prescribe rigid guidance for this highly variable follow-up stage, they offer authentic conversational scenarios for children to reference. A notable example from *Elementary Learning* is the dialogue between Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and his student Liu Shi'an 劉世安 (1048–1125):

Liu Shian once visited Sima Guang and asked about the essence of devoting oneself to cultivating one's conduct, what could be practised for a lifetime. Sima replied, "Is it not sincerity?" Liu continued to ask, "Where should one begin to practice it?" Sima said, "Start by not speaking falsely."³⁶

For young readers, this exchange provides a model for sustained inquiry. It illustrates that effective questioning should not cease with an initial, abstract answer but should continue until a concrete, actionable understanding is reached.

Furthermore, this dialogue serves as a practical demonstration of the questioning methodology taught in the primers. Liu's inquiry was initiated by a clearly recognised knowledge gap ("how to cultivate oneself diligently"). He engaged in a deep metacognitive search, identifying what he lacked (the essence of self-cultivation) and what he sought (lifelong practical guidance). Consequently, he formulated a precise question, identified a suitable informant (his teacher), and chose an appropriate context. Upon receiving the initial answer ("sincerity"), his prior metacognitive work allowed him to assess the response, recognising that his need for practical guidance remained unsatisfied as he only received an

³⁴ Samuel Ronfard and others, 'Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development', p. 105.

³⁵ Samuel Ronfard and others, 'Question-asking in Childhood: A Review of the Literature and a Framework for Understanding Its Development', p. 105.

³⁶ Original text: 「劉忠定公見溫公，問盡心行己之要，可以終身行之者。公曰，其誠乎。劉公問行之何先。公曰，自不妄語始。」Zhu Xi, Chen Xuan, annotate., 'Yuding xiaoxue jizhu', p. 604.

abstract concept. He did not ask for a definition of sincerity, as it's not his main doubt; rather, he skillfully generated a new, more targeted question based on the response, the practical starting point. This question ultimately yielded the desired, applicable answer to him.

The model discussed above demonstrates that primers guide learners to inquiry by prescribing conduct for each stage and providing practical scenarios for emulation. They teach children to recognise doubt as a starting point, to engage in deeper metacognitive reflection through the cultivation of humility, to follow step-by-step protocols for posing questions, and to persist in inquiry until a satisfactory understanding is reached. Through this methodology, children learn to acquire information effectively, thereby bridging knowledge gaps and deepening their comprehension.

3. Conclusion

In response to the identified gap in modern pedagogy regarding how to teach children to question, this essay has demonstrated that Traditional Chinese primers offer a new insight. The analysis reveals that the primers provide not only general guidance about how to question but also cultivate two cognitive skills that are essential for effective inquiry. This equips youngsters to seek information effectively, which directly aligns with the goal of fostering “ambitious and capable” lifelong learners as required in the Curriculum for Wales.

Moreover, by comparison to modern pedagogy on teaching questioning, such as the Question Formulation Technique, a central and novel finding of this analysis is the dual-function nature of the primers' methodology. In teaching the technical skill of questioning, they simultaneously instil moral character through every instruction—specifically, the mindset of intellectual humility and other-oriented consideration. Consequently, this methodology offers a valuable lens for contemporary curriculum design. Character teaching might not be regarded as an extracurricular subject. Still, by recognising the common ground and overlap between learning skills and character development, we can envisage a more holistic pedagogy where the practice of learning naturally cultivates both competence and virtue.

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