

What does self-cultivation mean in the context of Confucianism?

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, self- cultivation can be defined as, 'the development of one's mind or capacities through one's own efforts.' (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary 2024)

In this essay, I will endeavour to explain what self- cultivation means in the context of Confucianism by examining the contribution of key thinkers on the topic and offering pertinent commentary on them. The term self- cultivation, from a Confucian perspective at least is intrinsically connected to human relationships in their numerous forms: family, friendship, citizenship, leadership and virtuous acts. Consequently, any notion of the self pertaining to this particular Chinese faith tradition needs to be comprehended within a social context, rather than via the individualistic connotations of the aforementioned quotation. Confucians emphasise 'self-cultivation' and adherence to societal norms, advocating for educational and familial duties. The self that needs to be cultivated has two aspects:

'... first the relational notion of the self, according to which the familial and social roles filled by an individual determine who that individual is or ought to be, and then the transformational notion of the self, according to which individuals determine their selves through a lifelong task of ethical self-examination and self-construction.' (Bunnin, 2014).

The former, relational aspect seems to be in marked contrast, '... to the modern Western liberal conception of the self...' (Yu 2005, p. 281). The teachings of Confucius make clear reference to what a person should/ ought to be, but this is only made possible via human relationships.

Furthermore, essential Confucian concepts like virtue, humanity (ren), and righteousness (yi) can only be correctly comprehended within the context of their relationship to others. One should develop a moral sense by means of engaging with people in the correct manner:

' Since humanity, in the Confucian perspective, can never be the private possession of a single individual, self- realization entails the task of bearing witness to the that dimension of humanity which is communal and, in the ultimate sense transcendent.' (Tu 1984, p.381)

"Ren" (仁), or "benevolence" means: consideration of others, sympathy, and compassion. It is an integral aspect of self- cultivation within Confucianism .If people taken into account consideration of others when they interact, human

relations will be shaped without resistance and opposition, arguments and conflicts, hatred and malice. Essentially, *ren* is a virtue that describes the good qualities of a person who is altruistic or reaching for higher ideals. It is considered to be the foundation of moral conduct and effective relationships, and it is based on treating others with respect, empathy, and compassion.

' In the Analects, the achievement of *ren* is said to be a process of *shiuji* (the cultivation of the self). An excellent or virtuous person (*junzi*) is he who "cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence" (14:42). To cultivate is to "cultivate virtues" (7:3).¹³ The roots of a person's virtuous character are said to be filial love and fraternal respect.¹⁴ Self- cultivation is a process of expanding these roots to larger communities. "Once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom" (1:2). Family relationships are the source and grounds for the cultivation of the self.' (Yu 2005, p.287)

In a similar way to Aristotle's notion that man is a social/political animal, an integral feature of Confucianism, '... is to analyse the individual in terms of society, since we act within a community and we cannot abstract from that community, when we seek to determine our duties. The Golden Rule, ' Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do you' implies that one's duties to oneself and others are parts of the same thing. ' (Leaman 1999, p. 74)

Essentially, the Confucian moral life is built around the cultivation of moral/ ethical character. Both the Analects and the Mencius emphasise the importance of self-cultivation in creating a moral society and the avoidance of neglect in personal development.

'... Confucianism...asserts that society is both necessary and intrinsically valuable for self- realization.' (Tu 1985, p.26)

With this in mind, it seems that a parallel can also be drawn between Aristotle's notion of virtue ethics and the Confucian concept of self- cultivation:

'Like Aristotle, Confucius is concerned with moral rather than metaphysical identity of the self. He is interested in the development of an ethical character rather than what it is that remains the same person over time.' (Yu 2005, p. 290)

According to Confucianism, self-cultivation is concerned with balancing our dispositions, not restricting them. Like Aristotle's concept of the Golden Mean (that virtue is a balancing act between excess and deficiency, for example courage avoids recklessness or at the other extreme, cowardice) as embodied in the man of virtue, the junzi's virtue is an intermediate condition that avoids the deficiencies/ vices of extremes. Exhibiting such virtue, the junzi is, in the words of Analects 13.21, "a person of perfectly balanced conduct." A self so cultivated, that it displays integrity (as opposed to dishonesty/ discordance). Its dispositions harmonise, rather than conflict with each other.

Social roles and ethics are important concerns for Confucian thinkers. However, the self is more than the sum of its social roles. The self is not submerged in the social, rather the social is a auxiliary mechanism; a means to the goal of self-actualisation. It begins in the immediate dyadic relationship that circumscribes our lives. Accordingly, relationships provide a constraint, a limitation that provides the necessary stimulus for self-cultivation. As relationships develop/ grow, we need to take these primary relationships seriously and be able to see ourselves in terms of distinctiveness. Individuality does not exist in Chinese philosophy in the same way as it does in Western philosophy. Nevertheless, the Chinese have a strong sense of selfhood. Self-realisation involves understanding how our own endowments are different from us and unique to us.

The Chinese way is less dualistic than the Western sense of self. According to Confucianism, the beginning of religion begins with the self, but one that is more holistic than fixed, individualistic categories:

'Confucius advocated that, in the project of cultivation, one starts with oneself and one's most immediate relations. Self-cultivation and self-integration begin by working on oneself.'
(Sellmann 1987, p.377)

Clearly, social roles and ethics are important concerns for Confucian thinkers. Nevertheless, the self is more than the sum of its societal roles. Henceforth, one should be aware that the self is not submerged in the social. The social is a subsidiary mechanism; a means to the goal of self-actualisation. Socialisation begins in the immediate dyadic (involving two or more people) relationship that circumscribes our lives. Relationships provide a constraint, a limitation that provides the necessary stimulus for self-cultivation. one begins with the self, but one that is more holistic than fixed categories:

' Confucianism does not accept the soul-body, *res cogitans-res extensa* dichotomy so dear to Western thought. It does not recognize the soul or the cogito as a separate realm of human existence, let alone a privileged one. ' (Chaibong 2001, p.316)

: ' Indeed, the self is symbolic of self transformation. Confucianism has no symbol to indicate any kind of obvious shift from this natural social order to a transcendent reference point (e.g. God) Does this imply/ mean that Confucians have no capacity to ask ultimate questions? Do Confucian ethics simply consist of social ethics without any significant religious input? Confucian ethics are not merely a category of social ethics. It is not an ethics that is drawn back into the social/ the status quo if you will without having the capacity to lift off into something. Although Hegel accused Confucianism of being too traditional, Confucian selfhood itself is considered a transcendent reference point. It doesn't require the concept/notion of God. Selfhood is not only the centre of relationships, but also the centre of a dynamic process of spiritual development. Ontologically (to do with being/our original nature) is endowed by Heaven (Tian the celestial element of the cosmos). We need to adapt to social norms. However, selfhood is also the centre of a dynamic process of spiritual development. Ontologically, selfhood our original nature is endowed by Heaven (transcendent reference point) Nature provides an aptt gardening metaphor. Tian is embedded in our original nature. Selfhood is considered to be several things. Firstly, it is considered to be divine in its all embracing fullness. Secondly, it is considered to be both immanent (part of the social) and transcendent. In addition to this, it is considered to be intrinsic to us but also belonging to Heaven (Tian) The possibility of self- realisation and the ability to initiate this process are anchored in the structure of the self.

The concept of etiquette is an integral aspect of Confucian self- cultivation. Confucianism advocates that people show respect and consideration throughout everyday experience via symbolic conventional behaviours and modes of speech, Commonplace polite verbal gestures, such as saying 'please' and 'thank you', indicate respect and express consideration.

Essentially, these gestures inform others that we acknowledge and honour their humanity. Nevertheless, they are ethically valuable in more ways than just this.

Etiquette and rituals are considered a core aspect of Confucian philosophy and, as such, references to *li* (禮) appear in many classic texts such as the Ten Classics and Four Books. Throughout Chinese society, regardless of social class and ethnic background, ritual propriety or performance determines the personal, family, social, and political aspects of life. The contents of the ritual are procedures and manners that are important for everyday living, external respect based on this, and a sense of morality.

In terms of self cultivation the power of ritual traditions ceremony lead to social harmony acknowledges our natural state but us as actor of change

' The Confucians' energetic endorsement of etiquette is premised on an expansive view of moral life, a commitment to the view that the prosaic interactions and exchanges of ordinary life are pregnant with moral significance.' (Lai 1995, p. 426-427)

At this juncture, I think it is important to unpick the term *li* .For Confucians, it is a key concept that plays a significant part in self- cultivation

' There are two concepts of *li* in Chinese with distinct characters. One means ' principle' and could have well come first from the *Book of Changes*, whilst the other means ' ritual' coming from the word for ' sacrifice'. The latter is often translated as ' religion' or ' morality'; its original meaning is ' rites of propriety' and it denoted part of the ritual of sacrifice. It came to mean the rules of conduct and the right behaviour in particular circumstances.' (Leaman 1999, pp.180- 181)

For Confucians, human participation in sacred secular ceremony, as ceremonial beings, is the most complete expression of human nature and human dignity. People are transformed (perhaps transmogrified) by participation with others in ceremony which is communal. Ceremony is justified when we perceive how it

transforms base desires eventually into self- actualisation. Nevertheless, it requires dedication and much practice:

' One has to labour long and hard to learn *li* . The word in its root meaning is close to "holy ritual," " sacred ceremony." Characteristic of Cnfucius's teaching is the use of the language and imagery of *li* as a medium within which to talk about the entire body of the *mores*, or more precisely, of the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society.' (Fingarette, 1998,p.6)

However, it is important to recognise that self- cultivation, in the context of Confucianism, should not be considered to be simply the acting out of social rules on the part of people,'... men are by no means conceived as being mere standarized units mechanically carrying out prescribed routines in the service of some cosmic or social law.' (Fingarette 1998, p.7) On the other hand, they are not isolated, individual selves who have to draw on their own resources in order to live a virtuous existence. Rather, '... they become truly human as their raw impulse is shaped by *li*. And *li* is the fulfilment of human impulse, the civilized expression of it- not a formualistic dehumanization. *Li* is the specifically humanizing form of the dynamic relation of man-to-man.' (Fingarette 1998, p.7)

- Consequently, it would be erroneous to conflate Confucianism with ritualism whereby individuals are expected to pay blind obedience to social rules and norms:

'Confucian ethics, on the contrary, is built upon commonly shared human feelings, such as empathy. Ritual in this connection is not a fixed norm but a flexible and dynamic procedure by which self-realization as a concrete means for communal participation rather than as an isolated quest for inner truth becomes possible.' (Tu 1985, p.22)

Another way of making sense of the concept of self- cultivation in the context of Confucianism is to contrast its particular concept of the self with the Western perspective of the self.

Generally speaking, the Confucian view of the self differs from Western philosophy in several ways. In Confucianism, people are defined by the roles they play in society and the relationships they have with others. In contrast, Western philosophy tends to define people by their intrinsic characteristics, which are not dependent on others. In Confucianism, the self is an ethical concept that represents a holistic view of human nature. In the West, the self is

more often understood through metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological lenses. In Confucianism, people are not considered to be independent beings, but rather develop into people through their relationships with others. In Western philosophy, the self is more individualistic. In Confucianism, respect is based on dedication and commitment, and is expressed via actions in relationships. In Western philosophy, individual rights are often emphasised, and society is expected to recognise and honour those rights.

' In contrast to a sharp distinction between soul or mind and body, leading eventually to the Cartesian self as a metaphysical subject, the central Confucian notion of a perceiving, feeling and active self was the heart-mind, a mental and physical unity.' (Bunnin, 2014).

Although some might disagree that social relationships (Taoists and Buddhists, in particular, spring to mind) are vital for self-realisation, according to Confucianism we cannot simply bypass social relationships and directly establish an intimate connection with Heaven (Tian). This seemingly rather paradoxical question invariably gives rise to a number of questions such as: how can I in the midst of social relationships realise my selfhood as the Heaven- endowed humanity? How can I turn an ontological assertion (my original nature endowed by Heaven) into an experiential reality? Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, whereas ontology is the branch of metaphysics which deals with the nature of being. A Confucian would feel perfectly at home with his/her social relationships; cultivating/exuding virtuousness and ease like an accomplished musician. In our advanced, contemporary age, it is easy to slip away from social norms, due to myriad distractions. Confucius advocated dance and music in order to cultivate the self. He believed that it represented the feeling of perfection in the way we conduct our lives. We always have to work on this. Indeed, it is a life- long process. A virtuous character keeps deepening and perfecting. For Confucius, however, a process of self-cultivation is one in which one's self grows and deepens.' (Yu 2005, p.295)

According to Confucianism, the self is not only reducible to our social relationships. The more social we become the more we understand/ comprehend ourselves. Consequently, it would be a mistake to conflate Confucianism with utilitarianism whereby individuals are expected to pay blind obedience to social rules and norms:

'Confucian ethics, on the contrary, is built upon commonly shared human feelings, such as empathy. Ritual in this connection is not a fixed norm but a flexible and dynamic procedure by which self-realization as a concrete means for communal participation rather than as an isolated quest for inner truth becomes possible.' (Tu 1985, p.22)

the notion of avoiding a narrow approach is an integral aspect of Confucianism...the Mean (chung) has two meanings: moderation and not leaning to one side.

' In the *Analects* we find equal emphasis on filial piety and brotherly respect, study and thought, rites and music, loyalty and faithfulness, substance and refinement, wisdom and humanity, disciplining oneself and restoring rights, and extensive learning and simplicity.' (Chan 1988 p. 235)

Next, self-cultivation in the context of Confucianism involves a lifelong process of self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-creation. that involves moral transformation.

' The Confucian belief in the perfectability of human nature is predicated on the assumption that learning to be human involves a lifelong commitment to and a continuous process of self-education.' (Tu 1984, p. 379)

Here, the emphasis seems to be firmly placed on a continuous process of becoming rather than being. Although ontologically, selfhood is endowed by Heaven (tian).(indeed, it can be considered a transcendent reference point in the absence of a deity, it is at centre of a dynamic process of self- cultivation. Consequently,'...' it is not the idealized state of being perfect but the result of concrete steps by which one becomes constantly renewed and invigorated towards a higher horizon of perfection that motivates the Confucian to forge ahead in the task of self-realization. To realize the primacy of the self as a

conscious, reflective, and ceaselessly transformative being is a precondition for understanding the Confucian idea of human perfectability.' (Tu 1984, p.279)

Self-cultivation in the context of Confucianism involves a lifelong process of self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-creation. that involves moral transformation and the pursuit of the Way ("dao"), In addition to this, it involves developing a sense of ritual propriety: This includes learning how to behave towards relatives, distinguishing right from wrong, and settling points that may cause doubt.

- By Immersing themselves in the rites: people are enabled to develop good social behavior. In terms of studying, this involves learning from a teacher and living ethically.
- Self-evaluation: This involves considering one's own moral integrity.

'We may characterize the notion of self-cultivation as articulated in Zhongyong 20 in the following way: (1) Self-cultivation involves a process of disciplining one's behaviour and shaping one's attitudes. This process has transcendental and religious overtones. (2) Self-cultivation is a moral project which is based on, and further nourishes, particular virtues. (3) Self-cultivation is a crucial step in the promotion of social and political order which, in turn, has tangible beneficial outcomes for the world at large.'

(Weingarten 2015, p. 173)

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Pain and Suffering in Confucian Self-Cultivation

Tu Wei-ming

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(Chaibong 2001, p.316)Confucian Rituals and the Technology of the Self: A Foucaultian Interpretation

Hahm Chaibong

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(Sellmann 1987, p.377)

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