

# Liberalism and Confucianism: Differences and similarities between the two educational models

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## Abstract:

In order to study the situation of education under different educational models, this article focuses on analysing the similarities and differences between the two different ideas in pedagogy (Confucianism and Liberalism), as well as the controversies encountered by the countries where they are practiced. In view of today's research focusing on a single education model, and few studies systematically comparing the two education models, this article aims to analyze the development, characteristics, advantages and controversies of liberalism and Confucianism in education in the form of literature review. Moreover, it elaborates the differences between the two educational philosophies from the perspective of higher education for their pros and cons, and compare their similarities and differences from the perspective of educational goals. This article focuses on analyzing the literature review of the influence of different ideas in education in the past 10 years, as well as the views of the different parties involved. Ultimately, it was found that liberalism emphasises individual freedom, independent thinking and self-realisation, and that the aim of education is to cultivate independent individuals who are able to freely choose and pursue their own goals in life, with an emphasis on individual progress and personal achievement, a diversity of evaluation criteria, and a focus on creativity and independence (Thompson, 2017& Mautner, 2018); whereas Confucianism emphasises the cultivation of morality, social responsibility and harmony, and that the aim of education is to cultivate ethical and responsible social members and to promote harmony in the family, society and the State emphasises moral cultivation and social contribution, with evaluation criteria focusing on moral performance and contribution to society (Yao, 1999 & Tan, 2017).

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Liberalism, East Education, Higher education

## 1. Introduction

Liberalism and Confucianism have played an important role in Western and Eastern education respectively. However, there is a lot of evidence that both liberal thought and Confucianism have some controversy (SurrIDGE, 2016&Yao, 1999). Liberal comrades who have instrumental value in the pursuit of a person's ability to determine their own behavior in a social, political or economic context have missed the core of the supply of education due to their inherent limitations (Thompson, 2017); on the other hand, the purpose of Confucian education is through the etiquette. Standardized behavior (Li) instills "Ren" (human nature) so that learners can understand and expand the "Dao" (method), but in this, whether students can learn relatively easily and stress-free, and whether critical thinking can receive exercise is questioned (Tan, 2017). As a representative educational philosophy of China and the West, there are many places that have certain complementarities and similarities. However, there is still

less comparative analysis of the two (Cheng, 2017). In the form of a literature review, this article first introduces the development and characteristics of liberalism and Confucianism, and analyzes its disputes in combination with different literatures. Second, it puts the perspective on higher education and analyzes the different effects of liberalism and Confucianism in detail. Finally, the two educational philosophies the comparison is presented and the similarities in the educational goals are analyzed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Liberalism and Neoliberalism

In the social sciences, one of the most commonly recurrent conclusions is that education leads to social liberalism (SurrIDGE, 2016). Human flourishing is acknowledged by liberal tradition as the ideal of the good life. There are two interpretations of the idea of Liberalism: according to one, living a good life is about a person realizing her full range of human potential, while according to the other, a happy

life is about a person being able to grow in her moral and intellectual capacities. In both forms, the state is expected to establish the necessary backdrop circumstances for growth (Mautner, 2018). For the educational version, Project On Liberal Education And The Sciences (American Association For The Advancement Of Science (1990) illustrated that liberal education produces open-minded individuals who are not bound by narrow-mindedness, dogma, preconceptions and ideology; who consciously express their views and judgements; who reflect on their actions; and who understand their place in society and in the natural world (Project On Liberal Education And The Sciences, 1990). Deng (2017) found the similar conclusion for this argument, which demonstrated that the development of human capabilities through the transmission of academic knowledge is a central goal of liberal education (Deng, 2017). Furthermore, Liberalism in higher education also promotes cultural understanding by integrating different views. For example, the investigation of “Chinese nature” in higher education in Southeast Asia highlights how cultural, geopolitical and socio-political factors affect educational institutions. This exploration reveals the complexity of cultural identity in the context of multiculturalism, and emphasizes the need to adopt a meticulous approach to internationalization and international student experience (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023).

Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is a branch of liberalism focusing on the notion of freedom, whereby public problems (which may seem like social problems under other schools of interpretation) are best solved through the laws and logic of the market (Thompson, 2017). Davies and Bansel (2007) demonstrated that, neoliberal subjects are characterized by the shaping of their hopes, concerns, and aspirations into the idea of being morally upright, responsible people who, as prosperous business owners, can provide the greatest possible life for their family (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Therefore, the neoliberal view of the individual as an economically self-interested subject (Olsen & Peters, 2007). According to this viewpoint, people are rational optimisers and the best judges of their own needs and interests. As such, the development of auditing, accounting, and management techniques is necessary to build the ultimate goals of liberal, choice, consumer sovereignty, competition, and individual initiative, as well as obedience and subordination (Olsen & Peters, 2007).

However, liberalism in education is controversial. For example, Thompson (2017) demonstrated that the social benefits of education, including fostering a sense of community, pursuing the common good, and supporting a democratic philosophy of living with others, have disappeared in an increasingly neoliberal framework in which teachers’ endeavours are incentivised by market-based

strategies at the expense of quality student experiences in order to keep schools in line with external ratings (Thompson, 2017). Sturrock (2021) get the same perspective on that, which show that for primary school teacher, the positive impact and stability of the fundamentals of “making a difference”, combined with the main result of “raising the bar”, has given rise to overwhelmingly negative perceptions (Sturrock, 2021). Moreover, some researchers argued that the shortcoming of liberalism is that it does not provide adequate educational benefits for these groups within the wider population. They argued that, given the insufficient recognition of the implicit concern with the characteristics and identities of the “majority” (i.e., white, Western, etc.), the educational environment for minorities would only continue to be disadvantaged under the priority objectives of liberalism (Thompson, 2017). Fernández and Sundström (2011) provide a further explanation for this: Since liberalism is based on the idea that “individuals are capable of knowing and deciding for themselves what constitutes a good and meaningful life,” it is believed that the virtues and personal attributes that contribute to the creation of such a life are private and should not be regulated by the government or any other authority (Fernández & Sundström, 2011).

## 2.2 Confucianism and Neo Confucianism

Confucianism contains rich historical, political, philosophical and social and cultural traditions, which originated from Confucius (551-479 BC). Confucianism emphasizes education heavily, and Confucius spent his whole life instructing his followers and convincing the ruling class of his day to adopt his ideas (Tan, 2017). China and other East Asian nations like Korea, Japan, and Singapore have greatly benefited from the profound and long-lasting influence of Confucian educational philosophy and practice. Together, these countries have created and flourished a “Confucian educational culture”. According to the study conducted by Yao (1999), the modern significance of Confucianism lies in its moral and spiritual values. Confucianism is still relevant today because of its emphasis on moral responsibility, the value of passing down morals, and its humanistic view of life. These aspects of Confucianism will help foster a culture of responsibility that will spur the creation of an all-encompassing educational system and assist individuals in discovering the true meaning of life in the era of the global village (Yao, 1999). Confucianism emphasises the relationship between the “ruler and the subject”, and in academic life, students should be “constantly examined, but not spoken to” - this is to “keep their minds free from interference”. leave their minds undisturbed”; for beginner learners, they should listen but not ask questions as they should not violate the learning

sequence (Li, 2019). However, a different conclusion was reached in Tan's (2017) study, which argued that Confucianism advocates a student-centred education that aims to equip and empower human beings to comprehend and expand the Tao and expects students to engage in reasoning and judgement on their own in order to cultivate contemplative and deductive thinking. In conclusion, they all share the following main pedagogical patterns: emphasis on education, high social status and respect for teachers, students' attention and discipline in the classroom, strong mastery of the basics, and repetitive practice (Tan et al., 2015). However, Confucianism has always tried to instil in individuals a drive to constantly improve themselves as individuals and as a social being so as to achieve a society where people can be fulfilled as individuals as social beings. Therefore, it is completely incorrect for Confucian philosophy to advocate the oppression of individuals for the sake of social cohesion and the sacrifice of minorities for the sake of the majority (Sigurðsson, 2015).

Confucian wisdom on being friendly with nature is potentially valuable in helping to cope with modern ecological problems and lead people towards a sustainable future (Chen & Bu, 2019). Neo-Confucianism, on the other hand, absorbed important ideas from Taoism and Buddhism about environmentally friendly practices, added philosophical perspectives on Confucian ethics, and applied ethical virtues to a wide range of cosmological perspectives, which subsequently led to a more rational and dialectical Confucian system of thought that focuses mainly on the ethics of cultivating one's own body in the context of a naturalistic cosmology and a celestial-humanistic view with ecological concerns (Li et al., 2022). For Neo-Confucianism, education is the task of perfecting and realising the heart, which is essentially the Divine Principle or inherent goodness, and is the master or creator of human life and the universe. At the same time, Neo-Confucianism emphasises learning characterised by cultivation of the body and its educational goal of perfecting the mind rather than teaching itself (Hwang, 2013). For example, in Tan's (2019) study of 'mindfulness', it was found that Neo-Confucianism, in contrast to its primary focus on the self, present state awareness and non-evaluation, 'mindfulness' emphasises interdependence, social contribution and moral purpose (Tan, 2019).

### **3. Focus on Higher Education Perspectives**

#### **3.1 (Neo) Liberalism**

From the Victorian emphasis on the cultivation of civilisation and the transmission of culture across generations, universities have played many defining roles in the UK

over the years. However, the late twentieth century saw a rapid and significant expansion of the higher education system, which has resulted in a growing diversity of universities and students within the system (Anderson, 1995 & Boliver, 2011). In order to enrich the knowledge base of higher education research and to assess the impact of neoliberalism and globalisation on higher education, Mahony and Weiner (2017) reviewed published research and selected online archives and sources, conducted in-depth interviews with academics in education disciplines across all regions of the UK, and found that bullying is a feature of neoliberalism in higher education, and that university staff have higher levels of stress than the average UK employee. Neoliberalism has had a significant impact on university life in the UK (Apple, 2001). This has included increased pressure on staff and students, although some positive aspects and strategies of resistance have also been noted. Senior management sometimes mediates external pressures, and creative resistance strategies can mitigate the negative effects of neoliberalism (Mahony & Weiner, 2017). In addition, the advance of neoliberalism in higher education has been a continuous process, albeit one that has merged at different speeds and of a different nature and has been thought of differently by those with different roles in the educational enterprise. The loss of academic control of universities, including the loss of tenure, and the introduction of (fiscally led) measures of competition in the name of public accountability. According to Harvey (2005)'s study, which has the similar argument: Neoliberalism is a political economics practice theory that contends that granting people the flexibility and talents to pursue their own entrepreneurial endeavors within an institutional framework that is characterized by robust private property rights, unrestricted markets, and unrestricted commerce will maximize human well-being. Non-managers appeared to be as much involved in the workings of neoliberalism as managers and were inevitably affected by shifts in corporate strategy and changes in top management, and saw the privatisation and subsequent decline of a range of services previously run by the university as a feature of neoliberalism; and trade union representatives appeared to understand higher education neoliberalism in a more nuanced way than their colleagues (Mahony & Weiner, 2017). This case reflects a phenomenon that corresponds to Hastings' (2019) study that a distinctive feature of the development of neoliberal education policy has been a marked weakening of democratic processes. Corporations, philanthropic foundations, and think tanks have been the primary developers and purveyors of pro-market education policy, viewing education as an economic investment that is fundamentally not about free markets and competition, but about increasing

the profits and wealth of the economic elite at all costs (Hastings, 2019). In general, this study demonstrates effective resistance to the inevitable corporate repression of academic autonomy and innovation while also validating the unfavorable aspects noted in the literature on neoliberalism in higher education.

### **3.2 (Neo) Confucianism:**

For a long time, China has been concerned about the quality and equity of education. Though he did not use the term “educational fairness” specifically, Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, educator, and thinker, promoted the idea of education for all more than 2,500 years ago. Additionally, he stressed the importance of a high-quality education for societal and personal growth (Mu et al., 2013). Confucianism not only echoes the modern understanding of educational fairness, but also conforms to China’s current education quality, that is, it emphasizes the cultivation of people with all-round development through a learner-centered approach (GU Ming-yuan, 2010). In order to study the fairness and quality of Chinese education under Confucianism, Mu et al. (2013) analyzed multiple dimensions of Chinese education based on the current situation. For example, in recent decades, the disconnect between formal education and real life and the traditional quality of exam results-oriented education have been widely criticized. The learning process is not pleasant for Chinese students. Teacher-led classroom, rote memorizing and cramming learning is a typical representative of the examination orientation of Chinese education (Pepper, 2000). Therefore, students have been suffering from too much homework for a long time. Lin and Zhang (2006) also came to a similar conclusion: junior high school students spend an average of 4-6 hours a day doing homework, and even during school holidays, they have almost no leisure time (Lin & Zhang, 2006). In addition, education equity, as a social equalizer, is based on its premise that it is committed to providing education fairly across historical social stratifications, regardless of children’s socio-economic background, regional place of residence, gender or ethnicity, to ensure equal educational opportunities and rights. However, in view of the large scale of China’s education system, achieving equity has never been achieved. It’s an easy thing (Liang, 2012). For example, although teachers have a great impact on students’ performance (OECD, 2019), poor schools are not always equipped with qualified teachers. Through this research, it is not difficult to find that although China’s Confucianism has been fully played in contemporary education, there are still shortcomings and disputes in terms of educational fairness and quality.

## **4. Comparison between Liberalism and Confucianism**

Globalization is generally seen as a constant force, but internationalization has become essential to the fundamental operations and strategies of higher education institutions. Global crises are conceivable, and higher education’s response to them is closely linked to world events (Lee, 2021). Creating regional centers of education and directing academic science more in the direction of the government have been seen as ways to improve soft power, competitiveness, and standing abroad. Using university rankings to strengthen national higher education institutions, cultivate national soft power, and boost competitiveness in the global market are some reasons why they are used as a geopolitical tool (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). As a result, contrasting educational ideas and systems is crucial.

There are parallels between Confucianism and liberalism. Both the liberal arts and the Confucian traditions offer educational programs that enable people to relate their life path to humankind as a whole and view themselves in a broader societal context (Cheng, 2017). Confucius said, “I am fifteen and aspire to learn, thirty and established, forty and undoubted, fifty and know the fate of heaven, sixty and obedient, seventy and follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of the rules.” Indicating the need to be free from any dependence or confusion as a life goal in the learning life, the purpose of learning is ultimately to align one’s heart with truth and justice (Confucius et al., n.d.). This coincides with the idea of liberalism. According to Blackmer et al. (1952)’s study, liberal education is an education that empowers people to be free because it helps to develop “well-rounded human beings who are fully aware of themselves and their place in society and the universe (Blackmer et al., 1952). In addition, both the liberal arts tradition and the Confucian tradition prescribe the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the full development of a person, albeit in slightly different details and emphases. Liberal arts education actually develops concrete skills and values and lays a heavy focus on the capacity to think critically and analytically in addition to having vast knowledge and profound comprehension. It is not as abstract or elusive as one might believe (Cheng, 2017); whereas Confucianism’s emphasis on self-cultivation stems from the firm belief that all people are born with the ability to discern right from wrong and good from evil (Tu & Wei -Ming, 1985).

Furthermore, Cheng (2017) mentions that, more than the exercise of critical thinking in liberal education, it is widely believed that the traditional Chinese teaching style, characterised by rote learning and heavy reliance on

Confucian classics, does not foster independent and critical thinking. However, this is controversial. In early Confucian thought, Sigurðsson (2015) found it easy to find a type of critical thinking understood as an epistemological function of revealing hidden assumptions and being sceptical of what is said, e.g. “to learn without thinking is confusing, to think without learning is perilous” (Confucius et al., n. d.). Here, reflection is equivalent to reasoning, whereas learning involves one’s understanding of reality, in particular the cultural tradition in which one lives (Sigurðsson, 2015). Tan (2016) also responds favourably to this viewpoint, whilst demonstrating that the realisation of Confucian “rites of passage “ (normative behaviour) requires and promotes critical thinking in at least two ways. Firstly, in order to follow the rituals, people must use their judgment and apply the Tao’s general knowledge, standards, and processes to specific situations with flexibility and understanding. Secondly, an individual’s judgement, in order to conform to the scope of rites, should be based on and motivated by the moral quality of ren, which embodies one’s moral character (Tan, 2016). This shows that both ideas also have something to offer in terms of critical thinking, but with a different focus.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, this article elaborates on the development of liberal education and Confucianism education, including neo-liberalism and neo-Confucianism, respectively, through the form of literature review, and analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the two ideologies, for instance, liberalism encourages self-directed explorations and emphasises independent thinking and self-realisation, but it can also make the educational environment of some minority groups continue to be disadvantaged; Confucianism emphasises the importance of monarchical. There is a difference in that moral development and social responsibility are emphasised, but under Confucianism student-teacher interactions are reduced and students have a very heavy workload. In addition, the use of both ideas in higher education education is also covered, making the differences between the two ideas even clearer. This essay also analyses the similarities between the two ideas, such as the fact that they both con varying degrees of emphasis on the importance of critical thinking, as well as naming the indispensability of a meaningful and fulfilling life. The limitations of this article are that it does not emphasise how to integrate the two ideas and does not take into account the lagging nature of the literature in the search for a long-time span. These issues can be taken into account in further research.

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