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DRAFT

Understanding Creativity in East Asia: Insights from Confucius' Concept of *Junzi*

Charlene Tan

Abstract

Research shows that East Asians generally value creativity when it brings about evolutionary changes and promotes moral and social values. With an aim to further understand the concept and cultural foundation of creativity in East Asia, this article focusses on Confucius' concept of *junzi* (exemplary or paradigmatic person). It is argued that a *junzi* embodies creativity in three main ways. First, a *junzi* exercises creativity by actively interpreting experiences and constructing personal meanings within one's sociocultural context. Secondly, the *junzi*'s creativity is grounded in and motivated by one's moral duty to achieve humanity and social harmony. Thirdly, a *junzi* manifests creativity by seeking to bring about an intermediate rather than radical domain change in society. The article concludes with the key implications of an East Asian concept of creativity for design creativity and innovation.

Keywords

Confucius; creativity; East Asia; *junzi*; the West

Introduction

Despite a growing body of literature on the theory and practice of creativity in East Asian societies, there is relatively limited research on the cultural foundation of and justification for creativity in these societies. Tracing the East Asian conceptions of creativity back to its cultural roots, this article expounds the teachings of Confucius with a focus on his concept of *junzi* (an exemplary or paradigmatic person). At the outset, it is necessary to clarify that this article does not directly discuss the topics of design creativity and innovation which are the foci of this journal; instead, it explores the cultural basis of and influence on design creativity and innovation by interrogating the East Asian conceptions of creativity. Such a project has the potential of enabling scholars and educators to acquire a more nuanced understanding of creativity by locating it within specific historical, social and philosophical settings. The article begins by introducing the concept of creativity, followed by comparing the East Asian and Western conceptions of creativity.¹ The second part of the article examines Confucius' teachings that are relevant to the East Asian conceptions of creativity.

The Concept and Conceptions of Creativity

The precise meaning, characteristics, scope and types of ‘creativity’ have been the subject of debates and controversies over the decades (e.g. see Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Kaufmann, 1988; Sternberg, 1988; Weisberg, 1993; Boden, 1994; Gardner & Sternberg, 1994; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Carlile & Jordan, 2012). Beghetto and Kaufman (2014), in their review of more than six decades of research on creativity, note that most researchers have defined creativity with two key elements: newness (or difference) and task appropriateness (or usefulness) (e.g. see Barron, 1955; Guilford, 1950; Stein, 1953; Simonton, 2012, all cited in Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014). Elaborating on the notion of newness, Boden (1994) differentiates between that which is new to the person concerned but not necessarily to all (‘P creativity’), and that which is entirely new to humanity and to history (‘H creativity’).

Scholars have also classified creativity into several broad categories.² Carlile and Jordan (2012) identify three major types of creativity, namely ‘Big C Creativity’, ‘Middle c creativity’, and ‘Small c creativity’ (Carlile & Jordan, 2012; also see Gardner, 2004, Richards, 2010; Simonton, 2010). Accordingly, ‘Big C Creativity’ refers to radical or revolutionary domain change led by extraordinary individuals and/or groups, such as the development of quantum theory in physics. In contrast, ‘Middle c creativity’ refers to an intermediate change in a field brought about by motivated individuals and/or a group, such as the introduction of an atmospheric composition by the French Impressionists. Finally, ‘Small c creativity’ refers to a more limited and personal change by ordinary individuals, such as an individual personalising his or her appearance, activities or environment.

Kaufmann and Beghetto (2009) further introduce two types of creativity: ‘Mini-c’ and ‘Pro-c’. ‘Mini-c’ refers to novel and personally meaningful interpretation of experiences, actions and events that involve the construction of personal knowledge and understanding within a particular sociocultural context. Such creativity utilises the “internalisation or appropriation of cultural tools and social interaction” and “not just copying but rather a transformation or reorganisation of incoming information and mental structures based on the individual’s characteristics and existing knowledge” (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003, p. 63, cited in Kaufmann & Beghetto, 2009, p. 3). Another type of creativity is ‘Pro-c’ that refers to domain-specific developmental and effortful progression which is grounded in professional-level expertise (Kaufmann & Beghetto, 2009; also see Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson, Roring & Nandagopal, 2007). Creativity in this case requires prior mastery of a particular field and time for the development of expert performance before one is capable of creating and judging the worth of new ideas.

Adding to the above categories of creativity is context. Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) posit that what is considered creative is influenced by a specific social, cultural, and historical context. Research has shown that different cultures have similar as well as different understandings of and emphases on creativity (e.g. see Rudowicz & Hui, 1997; Lubart & Sternberg, 1998; Rudowicz & Yue, 2000, Niu & Sternberg, 2002, 2006). Broadly speaking, both the East Asians and the Westerners associate creativity with features such as originality, imagination, intelligence, individualism, and goodness (including both moral goodness and usefulness) (Niu & Sternberg, 2006). However, when we look at the issue at a deeper level, we find that “Asians hold a somewhat different view of creativity than do Westerners” and consequently “using the same set of tests to compare Eastern and Western creativity may not be appropriate” (Niu & Sternberg, 2002, p. 281). A survey of literature

reveals that East Asians and the Westerners differ in their conceptions of creativity in at least two main areas.

The first difference concerns the question of whether creativity is perceived to be ‘revolutionary’ (Big C) or ‘evolutionary’ (Middle c) in nature. ‘Big C Creativity’ is generally emphasised in Western culture whereas ‘Middle c creativity’ is valued in East Asian culture (Lubart, 2010; [Kozbelt, 2010](#); [Niu & Sternberg, 2002, 2006](#); [Carlile & Jordan, 2012](#)). Carlile and Jordan (2012) note that “[t]raditionally western cultures value groundbreaking or ‘Big C’ creativity, which alters existing paradigms and is attached to eminent individuals” (p. 68). Westerners typically associate creativity with a ‘rupture with the past’, ‘radical novelty’ and ‘disruptive innovation’, as opposed to minimal differences and variations (Hausman, 1987; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Lubart, 2010). These transformations are usually initiated by non-conformists who are motivated and given the freedom to challenge the status quo, authority and traditions.

In contrast to Westerners, East Asians generally prefer creativity in the form of ‘Middle c creativity’: incremental originality, progressive adaptation, alternation of existing schemes or practices over time, and a reinterpretation of tradition ([Gardner, 1989](#); [Niu & Sternberg, 2002](#)). What is uncomfortable and unacceptable for the majority of East Asians is ‘Big C creativity’ which endorses any model and practice of creativity that advocates a complete break from tradition, radical novelty or massive dislocation. The East Asian view of creativity also supports ‘Pro-c’ that focuses on domain-specific developmental and effortful progression coupled with professional-level expertise (Carlile & Jordan, 2012; also see Boden 2001). This emphasis on domain-specific expertise as a precondition for creativity explains why East Asian educators generally believe that skills rather than creative exploration should be developed first in children whereas the reverse is true among most Western educators ([Gardner, 1989](#)). Drawing upon his experience and research in China, Gardner (1989) sums up the key difference between the Chinese and Western views of creativity:

We may contrast the Western, more “revolutionary” view, with a more “evolutionary” view espoused by the Chinese. There is a virtual reversal of priorities: the young Westerner making her boldest departures first and then gradually reintegrating herself into the tradition; and the young Chinese being almost inseparable from the tradition, but, over time, possibly evolving to a point as deviant as the one initially staked out by the innovative Westerner (p. 282).

The second major difference between East Asians and the Westerners concerns the place of moral-social values and duty in creativity. Research has shown that Chinese culture tends to stress more of the moral and social dimension of creativity, in the sense that they are likely to see the promotion of moral goodness and contribution to the society as necessary for creativity ([Rudowicz & Yue, 2000](#); [Niu & Sternberg, 2002, 2006](#); [Kaufmann & Beghetto, 2009](#)). [Gardner \(1989\)](#) asserts that while the West tends to focus on the objective and amoral aspects of arts such as cognitive problem-finding and world-remarking activities, “these views were challenged by the Chinese belief in artistic activity as the re-creation of traditional beautiful forms and the engendering of moral behaviour” (p. 14). The need to preserve social harmony accounts, to a large extent, East Asians’ preference for an

evolutionary rather than revolutionary view of creativity. As explained by [Allinson \(1991\)](#):

If man is envisioned as being already in harmony with the cosmos and the world, it is much more likely for a philosophy or philosophies to evolve which point the way to maintaining, enhancing or, if it is lost, recovering that initial harmony with the world. There is absolutely no need, as in the case of Heidegger, for *discovering* man's nature to be in the world (or remembering this), and announcing this as if it were a great insight (p. 13, italics in the original).

A consequence of the East Asians' accent on social contribution is the rejection of any behaviour that threatens group harmony. As explained by [Niu and Sternberg \(2002\)](#), "in a collectivist society, defying the crowd may be seen as less valuable than making contributions to the society and sometimes defying the crowd may even be seen as strange rather than as creative in the East" (p. 33). In contrast, Western culture tends to prize the individual and aesthetic component of creativity rather than the moral-social duty in the process and product of creativity ([Niu & Sternberg, 2002](#); [Lubart, 2010](#); [Carlile & Jordan \(2012\)](#)). Individual personality traits, especially independence, expressiveness and assertiveness, are regarded positively as creative characteristics in Western culture, whereas the same characteristics are likely to be interpreted negatively in Chinese culture as 'rebelliousness' or 'deviance' ([Carlile & Jordan, 2012](#)).

More can be said about how culture, especially Confucianism, underpins and shapes the East Asians' views of creativity, and gives rise to divergence between East Asians and Westerners on creativity. For the rest of the article, we shall see how an East Asians' conception of creativity is grounded on and justified by Confucius' teachings as contained in the *Analects*. The *Analects* (literally means 'compiled sayings') is an ancient classical text that collates the words and deeds of Confucius and people close to him. Shortly after Confucius' death, his followers recorded his teachings in little 'books', which were subsequently organised to form what we know today as the *Analects* ([Ames & Rosemont, 1998](#)).³

Confucius' Concept of *Junzi*

A Confucian conception of creativity is best embodied in the ideal of *junzi*, a term so important to Confucius that it was mentioned over 100 times in the *Analects*. A *junzi* (literally 'son of a lord') historically refers to aristocrats and rulers in ancient China. Confucius adapted and expanded on this term by attributing a prescriptive and evaluative dimension to it. According to Confucius, a *junzi* is no longer defined by birth but by one's moral self-cultivation. Everyone *can* become a *junzi* and everyone *should* aspire to become *junzi* ([Tan, 2013a](#)).

It is the contention of this article that a *junzi* embodies creativity in three main ways. First, a *junzi* exercises creativity by actively interpreting experiences and constructing personal meanings within one's sociocultural context. This type of creativity is closest to 'mini-c' that directs one to focus on, explore and make sense of novel encounters in one's life. A *junzi* is a paradigmatic human being because he or she exemplifies Confucian virtues such as *ren* (humanity or benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety or more broadly, normative behaviours), *xiao* (filial piety) and *shu* (empathy and reciprocity). Space does not permit me to elaborate on each of these virtues. I

shall instead focus on one quality that is of particular relevance to the topic of creativity, namely *yi* (rightness or appropriateness). *Yi* refers to thinking, feeling and doing what is right or appropriate by exercising one's individual discernment and discretion. That a distinguishing feature of a *junzi* is the quality of *yi* is highlighted by Confucius: "The *junzi*, in one's dealings in the world, is not for or against anything; such a person goes with what is *yi*" (*Analects* 4.10; all subsequent citations in this article are from the *Analects*). Commenting on 4.10, Slingerland (2001) observes that "[t]his sort of situation-centered reasoning resembles Aristotelian *phronesis*, and ultimately 'what is right' in the ethical realm corresponds to what the gentleman (that is, the good person) [*junzi*] would do" (p. 103). The manifestation of *yi* involves a judicious combination of a subjective self-knowledge of the Way (*dao*) as well as an objective assessment of a situation in order to make an appropriate judgement or action (Cheng, 1972).

The optimal performance of *yi* involves 'mini-c' as a *junzi* needs to creatively interpret experiences, actions and events, and construct personal knowledge and understanding within a particular sociocultural context. *Yi* reflects a capacity to import an agent's significance into the world through one's flexibility to interact with and integrate into ever changing situations (Hall & Ames, 1987). A *junzi* demonstrates creativity by being "proper but not inflexible" (15.37; also see 1.8) and by not being "a vessel" (2.12). The 'vessel' here refers to the receptacle used in ceremonial rituals during Confucius' time that is designed for specific functions and occasions. Confucius views a *junzi* as being unlike a vessel that can only perform a specific designated function. Rather, a *junzi* is versatile, talented and imaginative enough to serve many functions and accomplish varied ends by using one's discretion to respond creatively to a range of situations. The process of manifesting *yi* involves another Confucian virtue, *shu* (empathy and reciprocity). As Ames (2011) points out, *shu* is the creative search for the most appropriate response in one's correlating of one's conduct and in the refining of one's moral judgements.

It is noteworthy that Confucius himself demonstrates creativity through *yi* by actively reflecting on the political and socio-cultural conditions of his time. Such a reflection led him to interpret experiences, actions and events against the backdrop of the ideal society he envisaged, leading him to construct his vision for all human beings. Confucius' exercise of *yi* is seen in his expression of his disappointment and criticism of political leaders of his time for their moral conduct. For example, he lamented, "How could I bear to look upon a person who in occupying high office is not tolerant, who in observing *li* (normative behaviours) is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?" (*Analects* 3.26, also see 3.1, 3.2, 3.10). Confucius was equally critical of the values and conduct of the people of his time. For instance, he critiqued the masses' view of filial piety: "Nowadays a person is considered filial if he provides for his parents. Even dogs and horses are provided for. If there is no respect, what is the difference?" (2.6). Rejecting the tradition of his time, Confucius sought to reinterpret that tradition through his teachings. Specifically he envisioned a community of *junzi* who collectively strive to "broaden the Way (*dao*)" (15.29). Cognisant of Confucius' ideal of a *junzi* as a creative person, Ahn (2005) asserts that the *junzi* in the *Analects* is a conscientious intellectual whose role is to criticise the main problems of his or her society.

The ability of a *junzi* to creatively interpret and construct personal meanings brings us to the second creative characteristic of a *junzi*: such a person has a moral duty to broaden the Way and thereby achieve *ren* (humanity or benevolence) and social harmony. A *junzi* is one who is "anxious about the Way" (15.32) and "learns in

order to reach that Way” (19.7). The calling of the *junzi* to broaden the Way is inherently and necessarily moral. The word ‘broaden’ signifies that the Way can be extended and is not fixed and unchanging; human beings are empowered to realise the Way through their collective actions on earth. Ames and Rosemont (1998) point out that to ‘broaden the Way’ is “to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce and extend the way of life inherited from one’s cultural predecessors” (p. 45). Rather than a predetermined or transcendental truth, the Way needs human beings to move the world forward by generating an actual order in the world (Li, 2006). It follows that to broaden the Way requires a community of *junzi* to direct and change society so as to realise the Way on earth.

The ethical nature is further illustrated in the *junzi*’s attitude towards *ren* (humanity or benevolence). Confucius states, “How could a *junzi* who abandons *ren* merit that name? A *junzi* does not leave *ren* even for the space of one meal; such a person is certain to be with *ren* if one is in a hurry or distress” (4.5). To practise *ren* is to “love others” (12.22) and to “cultivate oneself in order to bring peace to the multitude” (14.42). That the moral goodness of a *junzi* is demonstrated through one’s relationships with others reminds us of the social component of creativity. A *junzi* is someone who desires and seeks to achieve *he* (harmony) (c.f. 13.23). A disciple of Confucius maintained that “Among the functions of *li* (normative behaviours), harmony is the most valuable; this harmony made the Way of the Former Kings beautiful, and was a guiding standard in all things great and small” (1.12). To broaden the Way on earth is to achieve harmony on earth. According to Confucius, the Former Kings kept to the straight Way by observing *li*, which led to the establishment of harmony in the empire. Harmony function as a “guiding standard for all things great and small” when a *junzi* not only co-exists peacefully with other human beings, but also “helps others to reach their goal” (6.30). Li (2006) maintains that the Confucian concept of harmony may include “harmony between societies, harmony within a society with different ethnic groups (or political parties), harmony within the same ethnic group with different kin, and harmony among the same kin” (p. 588). The accent on harmony and the need to contribute towards society explain why personal qualities valued as creative in Western culture, such as independence and assertiveness, are likely to be viewed negatively in Chinese culture as detrimental to social cohesion.

It should, however, be clarified that Confucius does not necessarily oppose the traits of independence and assertiveness. It is reasonable to describe Confucius as an outspoken person with a mind of his own. The key issue here is whether one channels one’s independence and assertiveness for the benefit of society or otherwise. In the same vein, Confucius does not teach that we should aim at harmony at the expense of our individual differences or coercing others to conform to one’s own standards. Confucius advocated that we should “seek harmony not sameness” (13.23) where diversity and unity co-exist. We are further reminded in the *Analects* that “to know harmony and aim to achieve it without being regulated by *li* will not work” (1.12). In other words, we should not seek harmony for harmony’s sake, thereby achieving only superficial cohesion, but seek genuine harmony by acting normatively (Tan, 2012, 2013b).

It is also important to note that ‘broadening the Way’, for Confucius, does not entail a break or total rejection of one’s tradition. This brings us to the third and final point about a *junzi* as a creative person: a *junzi* manifests creativity by seeking to bring about an intermediate rather than radical domain change in society – a type of creativity that supports ‘Middle c creativity’. In other words, a *junzi* aims at

incremental originality, progressive adaptation, alternation of existing schemes or practices over time, and a reinterpretation of tradition. Confucius professed that he “transmits but does not make; trusts in and loves antiquity” (7.1). The ‘antiquity’ mentioned refers to the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties where paradigmatic sage-kings such as Yao, Shun (8.18, 8.19, 8.20) and Yu (8.21) lived. This golden age of China was regarded by Confucius as a period in which an ideal social, political, and ethical order existed and was exemplified in the basic features of civilised human life in China (Wilson, 1995). Among the earlier dynasties, Confucius upheld the Zhou dynasty (about 1122 B.C.E) as the best tradition that broadened and realised the Way. He declared that “I follow the Zhou” (3.14) and that the excellence or virtue of Zhou “can be said to be the highest excellence of all” (8. 20, also see 17.5).

However, it should be pointed out that Confucius praised the Zhou dynasty not because it had single-handedly broadened the Way. Rather, the Zhou dynasty had learned and adapted exemplary practices from two earlier dynasties, namely the Xia and Shang dynasties, as noted by Confucius: “The Zhou dynasty has before it the two Ages. Such a wealth of culture! I follow the Zhou” (3.14). ‘Middle c creativity’ is an apt description of what Confucius had in mind as he spoke approvingly of different dynasties making incremental and progressive changes: “The Yin built on the *li* (normative behaviours) of the Xia, the abolitions and additions can be known; the Zhou built on the *li* of the Yin, the abolitions and additions can be known” (2.23). It is also instructive that Confucius did not just recommend following Zhou’s tradition. Rather, he advised a flexible and judicious selection of exemplary practices from various dynasties for a ruler to effectively govern a state: “Follow the calendar of the Xia, ride on the carriage of the Yin, wear the ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and as for music, play the *shao* and *wu*. Abandon the tunes of Zheng and keep glib people at a distance. The tunes of Zheng are lewd and glib people are dangerous.” (15.11; also see 3.25 and 7.14 on the beauty and felicity of the *shao* music). Some readers may argue that Confucius’ belief in appropriate modifications of traditional practices contradicts his other claim that he “transmits but does not make; trusts in and loves antiquity” (7.1). However, the apparent contradiction can be resolved when we realise that while it is true that Confucius “does not make” or does not create something out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), his transmission of antiquity is not wholesale but selective. Hagen (2011), in describing Confucius’ project as ‘selective traditionalism’, claims, “Although it is undoubtedly conservative, the fact remains that choosing which elements are to be conserved is necessarily an interpretive project and the resulting mix will always be novel” (p. 9). It follows that a *junzi* is one who appropriates and makes relevant the wisdom of the originating thinkers of the past by extension to one’s own place and time (Hall & Ames, 1987). The evolutionary rather than revolutionary aspect of Confucian creativity is elaborated by Hall and Ames (1987):

The dominance of tradition as the source of practical and affective norms leads to a restriction of the novel contributions of persons as individuals who would break the continuities of the past and establish new directions in thought or institutional practice. ... In Chinese philosophy, the mark of excellence is found in the manner in which the wisdom of the originating thinkers of the past is appropriated and made relevant by extension to one’s own place and time (pp. 23-24).

Accompanying ‘middle c creativity’ is ‘Pro-c’ that, as mentioned, refers to domain-specific developmental and effortful progression which is grounded in professional-

level expertise. Stressing the importance of having a firm foundation in learning, Confucius shared that he was set on learning at fifteen (2.4), and that he “quietly stores up what is learnt and is insatiable in learning” (7.2, also see 7.17, 9.2). He highlighted the need to base one’s thinking on learning: “I once went without food the whole day and without sleep the whole night by focusing on thinking; that was not beneficial and it is better to spend the time learning” (15.31) (on Confucius’ concept of thinking, see Tan, 2014). Skills development and content mastery are obtained when one “learns culture broadly” (6.27), and “learns and practises what one has learnt from time to time” (1.1). A solid foundation enables a learner to “be aware of what one lacks daily, and not forget what one has acquired monthly” (19.5). Only after one has acquired the basic skills and possessed the professional domain expertise could one be creative by “selecting what is good and following it” (7.28).

Conclusions

This article has explored Confucius’ concept of *junzi* as a creative person who firstly, actively interpreting experiences and constructing personal meanings within one’s sociocultural context. Secondly, such a person’s creativity is grounded in and motivated by one’s moral duty to achieve humanity and social harmony. Finally, a *junzi* manifests creativity by seeking to bring about an intermediate rather than radical domain change in society.

Reflecting the influence of traditional culture on contemporary conceptions of creativity, empirical studies have shown that East Asians demonstrated one or more of the characteristics of creativity that are consistent with or underpinned by Confucius’ teachings. On the moral-social dimension of creativity, [Rudowicz and Hui \(1997\)](#) report that their Chinese samples identified “contributing to the progress of society” as one characteristic of creativity (cited in [Niu & Sternberg, 2002](#)). [Li \(2004\)](#)’s study of Chinese learners in the United States shows that their belief in moral self-perfection as a key purpose of learning is influenced by the Confucian value of *ren* (humanity or benevolence) as “a lifelong striving to become the most genuine, sincere, and humane person one can become” (p. 137). Such lifelong striving requires the learner to exercise creativity by conscientiously interpreting one’s experiences and constructing personal meanings. On the de-emphasis of creativity as radical and socially disruptive, [Cheng \(2011\)](#)’s research on Chinese students in Hong Kong informs us that the students are generally weak in novel and innovative thinking, challenging authority and risk-taking attitudes, and that their weaknesses are due to their Eastern culture. Beyond the school context, researchers have also noted that East Asian employees such as those in China and Japan are perceived to be strong in incremental and process innovation as well as ‘imitation behaviour’, but relatively weaker in invention and breakthroughs ([Herbig & Jacobs, 1998](#); [Orr & Roth, 2012](#); [van Someren & van Someren-Wang, 2013](#)).

There are two main implications for design creativity and innovation arising from our understanding of a Confucian conception of creativity. First, we could capitalise on the East Asians’ focus on the evolutionary aspect of creativity by complement this trait with the Westerners’ emphasis on generating revolutionary changes. This could be achieved through cross-cultural creative teams that bring together East Asians and Westerners who are adept at generating either evolutionary and revolutionary changes when the occasion calls for them. After all, successful projects in design creativity and innovation require not just exploration and

experimentation which tend to be valued by Westerners, but also skills and expertise which are underscored by East Asians. The spotlight on the development of skills and expertise ('pro-c') as well as personal interpretation and construction of meanings ('mini-c') serves as a firm foundation for one to move on to the next level by reflecting and changing the foundation itself. [Gardner \(1989\)](#) highlights this point when he avers that the "skills inculcated in young Chinese allow them, paradoxically, the freedom to create powerful new messages which can be understood by others", in contrast to Americans who, lacking such skills, "are often forced as adults to revert to tricks; or to acquire new skills at a time when it is far harder to do so; or to remain unable to communicate their (deeply valued) conceptions to others" (p. 306). Another asset of an East Asian concept of creativity is its stress on bringing about valuable changes in society in a harmonious and collective manner ('middle c') without any major social disruptions or upheaval. This moral-social and incremental dimension creativity is salutary especially in our globalised and multi-cultural world where creative solutions are needed and achieved through dialogue, ethics and consensus building.

The second implication arising from our understanding of a Confucian conception of creativity is the need to explore culturally sensitive ways to support creativity in East Asian contexts. Any efforts to encourage students and employees in East Asian societies to be more creative and innovative should take into account the East Asians' preference for evolutionary changes as well as the promotion of moral-social values. A good suggestion is the introduction of 'innovation work groups' in China; Orr and Roth (2012) observe that such a strategy is effective in encouraging innovation as it fosters shared accountability and community support, and makes increased risk taking and experimentation safer. This is a good example of a culturally appropriate approach for East Asians to design, experiment and innovate – it creates and sustains an environment that acknowledges and preserves social harmony and allows the participants to contribute meaningfully, collaboratively and developmentally.

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Notes

¹ This article adopts Niu and Sternberg (2006)'s definition of 'the West' as "the culture of Europe and the people who share the same root or have religious link to Europe. Geographically speaking, it includes most parts of Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand" (p. 20). 'East Asia' refers to China and other Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) societies such as South Korea and Japan. By referring to 'the West' and 'East Asia', I am not assuming that the cultures within the respective regions (the West and East Asia) are homogenous and monolithic. I am also not assuming that all East Asians interpret and practise creativity in the same way, or that there are no similarities between East Asians and their counterparts in the West on their views on and application of creativity. Rather, my references to 'East Asia' and 'the West' serve only as useful conceptual tools to direct our attention to the influential role of culture and broad characteristics of different cultural groups, as identified by researchers. In doing so, I join Carlile and Jordan (2012) in viewing culture as part of what Hofstede (1991) calls 'software of the mind' where we highlight the general cultural traits of a group of people.

² Some readers may object to the classification of creativity into specific categories (e.g. 'Big C creativity', 'pro-c') on the ground that it is misleading to dichotomise

creativity in such an artificial and rigid manner. My response is that such categorisation is acceptable as long as we guard against over-simplifying the nature and application of creativity, and are aware of the overlaps between the categories of creativity in reality.

³ It should be clarified that the focus of this article is on Confucius as a philosophical and cultural figure, whose sayings attributed to him were passed down to us in the *Analects*. This article therefore is not concerned with the debate on the extent to which the *Analects* accurately records and transmits the teachings of Confucius as a historical figure (for further reading on the above-mentioned debate, see [Slingerland, 2001](#); [Shun, 1993](#); [Li, 2007](#)). Another note is that all the citations from the *Analects* are translated by me, unless otherwise stated. To ensure accuracy of my translations, I have consulted the translations and commentaries published in both English and Chinese by established scholars, including Ames and Rosemont (1998), Fu (2011), Lau (1979), Lau and Yang (2009), Slingerland (2003), Sun (1993), Yang (2010).