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Creativity and Confucius

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There is a common perception that Confucianism inhibits or even imperils the development of creativity, leading to East Asians being less creative than their counterparts in Anglophone societies. But did Confucius himself oppose creativity? Was Confucius a creative genius, and if so, in what ways? This article aims to answer these two questions by exploring the words and actions of Confucius as recorded in the *Analects*. It is argued in this essay that Confucius demonstrated and advocated a moral and social conception of creativity that emphasizes evolutionary rather than revolutionary changes. Confucius supported incremental changes that were built upon the wisdom of the past and posited the need for everyone to engage in moral self-cultivation within a community. This article contributes towards the research on the cultural influences on creativity from a Confucian perspective.

When one thinks of creativity, “Confucius,” “Confucianism,” and “East Asia” are unlikely to be words that come to mind for most people. On the contrary, widely-held beliefs are that Confucianism does not promote creativity, and in fact may suppress or even imperil the development of creativity. This may contribute to East Asians being perceived as less creative than their counterparts in Anglophone societies (e.g., Fielding, 1997; Kim, 2005, 2007, 2009; Kim & Michael, 1995; Ng, 2001; Rudowicz & Ng, 2003; Saeki, Fan, & Van Dusen, 2001). For example, Ng and Smith (2004) asserted that the Confucian tradition, being “highly authoritarian in character,” produces students who are “docile and teachable” rather than “individualistic, skeptical and egoistic,” traits which typically characterize creative persons (p. 87). In the same vein, Kim (2007) argued that four principles of Confucianism conflict with creativity: (1) an emphasis on education which “inhibits creativity through rote learning, extreme competition, a work-play dichotomy, and a devaluation of play”; (2) the family system, which “blocks creativity through strict gender role expectations, rigid parent-child relationships and an overemphasis on obedience, filial piety, and loyalty”; (3) hierarchical relationships, which “decrease creativity through unequal relationships, rigid social structure, gender role expectations, and authoritarian relationship between teachers and students”; and (4) the principle of benevolence,

which “stifles creativity through suppression of emotion, the silence ethic, an extreme value of humility, conformity, and stigmatized eccentricity” (p. 45).

This article does not dispute the claim that Confucianism, as interpreted by Confucian scholars, policymakers, and educators over the centuries, has advertently or inadvertently contributed to the detriment of creativity in East Asian societies. But such an outcome does not necessarily mean or imply that Confucius himself taught and supported such a view. Did Confucius himself oppose creativity? Was Confucius a creative genius, and if so, in what ways? This article aims to answer these two questions by exploring the words and actions of Confucius as recorded in the *Analects*—a Chinese classical text that compiles the sayings and conduct of Confucius and his followers.

It should be clarified at the outset that the focus here is not on what the historical Confucius was really like or what he actually propagated, since such an endeavour is likely to be fraught with controversies over the authenticity of historical sources and factual claims. Rather, this article centers on Confucius as a *cultural* figure whose sayings attributed to him were passed down to us via the *Analects*, among other sources. As a cultural figure, Confucius qualifies as a creative genius, at least if the social, attributional definition of creative genius is assumed (Kasof, 1995). Another clarification is that the references to Eastern/East Asian and Western in this article do not imply that there exist unchanging, homogenous, and monolithic Eastern/East Asian and Western cultures. Rather, the focus of our discussion is on the broad and

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general characteristics of both cultures, as informed by existing research, while acknowledging variations within each culture as well as overlaps between cultures. This article uses “Eastern” and “East Asian” synonymously, and defines East Asia as referring to China and other Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), such as South Korea and Japan; it also adopts Nie and Sternberg (2006)’s definition of the West as the culture of Europe and the people who share the same root or have religious links to Europe. The first part of the essay briefly introduces the Eastern and Western conceptions of creativity. This is followed by a critical exploration of the words and deeds of Confucius with respect to creativity.

Eastern and Western Conceptions of Creativity

Despite disagreements and debates over the exact definition and scope of creativity, scholars generally agree that creativity involves some form of newness or change. (For helpful readings on the history of research on creativity, see Albert & Runco, 1999; Carlile & Jordan, 2012.) Research shows that the key traits often associated with creativity include motivation, confidence, preference for aesthetic experiences, theoretical thinking, independence, and a sense of humor (Runco, 1987; Sternberg, 1985; Tardif & Sternberg, 1988; all cited in Rudowicz & Yue, 2000).

Niu and Sternberg (2002), in their literature review, reported that Easterners tend to connect the new with the old as well as highlight the social and moral values of creativity, whereas Westerners are more likely to emphasize some special individual characteristics. Another helpful distinction between Eastern and Western conceptions of creativity concerns whether creativity involves radical changes (revolutionary) or incremental changes (evolutionary). Researchers have noted that Westerners generally favor the former while Easterners generally prefer the latter (Carlile & Jordan, 2012; Chang, 1998; Hausman, 1987; Kozbelt, 2010; Lubart, 2010; Niu & Sternberg, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006; Tan 2016). Elaborating on the evolutionary sense of creativity in the context of aesthetics, Averill, Chon, and Hahn (2001) averred that “the goal is not to modify fundamentally—and certainly not to reject—previous ideas, but to breath (sic) new life into them, in order to make them better fit the circumstances” (p. 173). Acceptable creative changes within Eastern contexts are likely to be those that are built upon and extended from existing traditions and practices. On the other hand, novel and groundbreaking changes which are generally prized in Western cultures are likely to be resisted and rejected for disrespecting traditional wisdom and disrupting social harmony in East Asia. The relatively collectivist cultures in East Asia explain why East Asians stress the adherence to

and preservation of sociocultural norms and traditions, when compared to the more individualistic ideology in the West that values nonstandard ways of thinking (Kharkhurin & Motalleebi, 2008).

A related characteristic of the Eastern preference for evolutionary changes is an accent on moral self-cultivation as a creative process. The focus on individual effort and perfection is evident in the Chinese language that makes constant references to self-cultivation (*xiushen*), self-reflection (*zixing*) and self-discipline (*zili*) (Lee, 2004). The process of individual creativity is one of self-cultivation toward enlightenment; this explains why moral goodness, rather than novelty, is regarded as an essential element in judging creativity in Eastern societies (Niu & Sternberg, 2003). Through disciplined and lifelong effort to learn and practice virtues, individuals are encouraged to actively engage in a creative process of self-transformation and perfection (Niu, 2012; Tu, 1985).

Although Confucius did not discuss the topic of creativity directly, his views on the topic can be inferred from the *Analects*. (All the passages from the *Analects* were translated into English by the author.) A key consideration for this discussion is whether Confucius advocated creativity in terms of introducing newness or change, and if so, what form such newness or change took.

Creativity and Confucius

Confucius (c. 551 - 479 B.C.E.) lived during a time of political and social upheaval in the Spring and Autumn Period (c. 722 - 468 B.C.E.). Rather than seeking to obtain political power by military force, Confucius spent his whole life hoping to obtain employment so as to influence the political rulers with his ideas on governance and morality. His solution to the widespread unrest and political instability was to return to the ‘golden age’ of China’s history, specifically to the beliefs and practices of the sage-kings from the Zhou dynasty. That Confucius did not advocate radical changes and instead championed the preservation of the old is seen in his claim that he “transmits but does not make; trusts in and loves antiquity” (*Analects* Section 7.1; all subsequent citations are from this text). Confucius professed to “follow the Zhou dynasty” (3.14) and proclaimed the virtue of Zhou dynasty as “the highest excellence of all” (8. 20; see also 17.5).

This does not imply that Confucius was merely a transmitter who sought to protect and preserve the tradition of the Zhou dynasty. Instead, Confucius believed in making appropriate, albeit incremental, changes to traditional norms where necessary. A case in point was his advice to rulers to govern a state:

Follow the calendar of the Xia dynasty, ride on the carriage of the Yin dynasty, wear the ceremonial cap of the Zhou dynasty, 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).

On the point of incremental changes, it is also noteworthy that the Zhou dynasty itself did not simply transmit the beliefs, values, and practices of previous dynasties, but had adapted and modified them along the way. Such changes were noted and approved by Confucius: “The Zhou dynasty built on the normative behaviours of the Yin dynasty, and the abolitions and additions (made by the Zhou dynasty) can be known” (2.23).

Not only did Confucius praise the Zhou dynasty for making the necessary “abolitions and additions,” he demonstrated this quality of judicious changes on several occasions. An example was his decision to go against a prevailing practice regarding prostration: “Nowadays, one prostrates oneself only after ascending the hall; this is arrogant. Although this goes against the majority, I prostrate myself before ascending” (9.3). Insisting that the new must be based on the old, Confucius teaches the need to “keep alive the old in order to know the new” (2.11). Confucius aptly illustrated this principle in his philosophy where he re-interpreted a number of traditional concepts such as *ren* (humanity or benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), and *junzi* (noble person). By combining the old and the new, Confucius offered new insights into familiar concepts and quietly transformed the thinking and conduct of the Chinese. Due to space considerations, this article shall focus only on Confucius’ re-interpretation of the concept of *li*.

Etymologically linked to religious sacrifices, *li* was understood as “ritual propriety” by the political rulers and masses during Confucius’ time. Confucius questioned such a narrow interpretation and re-defined *li* to become an all-encompassing concept that includes values, attitudes, and actions in all aspects of human life. The *Analects* records Confucius rejecting the prevailing understanding of *li* by asking a rhetorical question: “In referring to *li*, are we merely talking about jade and silk?” (17.11). Jade and silk were common items used in ceremonial observances in ancient China. Confucius proceeded to re-interpret *li* as follows: “Do not look unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not listen unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not speak unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not move unless it is in accordance with *li*” (12.1). His point was that all human behaviors—whether looking, listening, speaking and moving—must be in accordance with *li*, the moral values, attitudes and behaviours modelled by the sage-kings from the Zhou dynasty. To observe *li*, according to Confucius, is to internalize and manifest virtues

such as *ren* (humanity or benevolence), *xiao* (filial piety), *shu* (empathy and reciprocity), *zhi* (wisdom), *yi* (rightness or appropriateness), *yong* (courage), and *he* (harmony). (For an in-depth discussion, see Tan, 2013a.) Among the virtues, *ren* (humanity or benevolence) is singled out as the quality that is most closely identified with *li*. When asked by his followers what *ren* is, Confucius replies that it is to “restrain the self and return to *li*” (12.1). Confucius elaborated on this point in the next verse:

When in public, behave as though you are receiving important guests; when employing the services of the common people, behave as though you are overseeing a great sacrifice. Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire. In this way, you will have no ill will in public or private life (12.2).

Accordingly, *ren* includes all moral values, attitudes and actions such as respect (“receiving important guests”), reverence (“overseeing a great sacrifice”) and empathy (“do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire”). Putting the two verses (12.1 and 12.2) together, what Confucius was saying is that we observe *li* when our thoughts, emotions and actions are *ren*-centered. To state it simply, *li* is the means to attain the goal of *ren*. It is instructive that Confucius did not reject the traditional definition of *li* as ritual propriety; rather, he has extended its scope to cover all normative behaviours in one’s life, as well as underlined the importance of integrating one’s values, attitudes, and actions.

Given that *li* encompasses all aspects of life, one needs to respond appropriately and flexibly in all situations. Creativity in the sense of newness or change is critical here as it is the quality that empowers one to freely and independently design and adapt existing practices in new circumstances. Lai (1995) pointed out that *li* “can be modified and, indeed, are varied and variable and manifest differently as they pertain to each different situation and to each particular relationship, although they may provide general guidelines for each kind of relationship” (pp. 255-256). It is important to note that the creativity (newness or change) championed by Confucius through his re-interpretation of *li* is inherently *moral* in nature, with *ren* at the heart of all observances of *li*. *Ren*-centered creativity is the means for human beings to incrementally and progressively broaden the *dao* or Way that links the past to the present and future. Such an endeavour, described by Ames and Rosemont (1998) as *creative personalization*, requires all individuals to actively reflect on, appropriate, adapt, and apply traditional beliefs and practices to their own unique circumstances. Confucius himself adopted a creative approach in his teaching, with *creative* here defined as novel

for his time. An instance was his contradictory responses to two protégés who asked him the same question:

Zilu asked, “Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?”

The Master said, “Your father and elder brothers are still alive. So how could you, upon hearing something, act upon it?”

Then Ranyou asked, “Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?”

The Master said, “Upon hearing something, act upon it.”

Gongxi Hua said, “When Zilu asked, ‘Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?’ You said, ‘Your father and elder brothers are still alive.’ But when Ranyou asked, ‘Upon hearing something, should one act upon it?’ You said, ‘Upon hearing something, act upon it.’ I am confused and I would like to ask about this.”

The Master said, “Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, and so I reined him in.” (11.22)

Confucius deliberately gave contrasting answers to the two protégés because he had customized his teaching to suit their different personality traits (today it may be called a *student-centered* approach). Underpinning Confucius’ contrasting treatments was *ren*, that was manifested in his love, care, and empathy for his students. As long as his values, attitudes, and actions were grounded in *ren* and in accordance with *li*, Confucius was at liberty to teach creatively.

Other creative or new teaching methods utilized by Confucius included inferential thinking, analogical thinking, and linking theory to practice (see Tan, 2014, for details). He stood out among his peers in rejecting the historical practice of restricting education to the aristocrats; he was willing to teach anyone regardless of one’s social status, economic background, and learning abilities. Such an act was arguably a bold and radical one that ushered in mass education and individual success based on the principles of equity and meritocracy in China.

Closely related to Confucius’ advocacy for mass education was his emphasis on moral self-cultivation as a creative process. Believing that “human beings are similar in their nature, but differ as a result of their practice” (17.2), Confucius teaches that everyone has the opportunity to become an exemplary or paradigmatic person (*junzi*) as long as one puts in effort to cultivate oneself (14.42). Moral self-cultivation involves a creative process of self-directed learning, authentic moral motivation, and self-actualization where an individual examines, illuminates, and shapes the meaning of one’s lived experiences (Tan, 2012). Confucius

shares about his own journey in moral self-cultivation: “At fifteen, I was set on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I was no longer doubtful; at fifty I understood the mandate of heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I could follow my heart-mind’s desires without overstepping the line” (2.4). Relating the Confucian concept of creativity to moral self-cultivation, Hall and Ames (1998) posited that

creativity is a notion that can only be characterised in terms of self-cultivation and articulation... Creativity requires that each participant in a relationship be continually in the process of creating the other. Community thus defined through the creativity of its members is programmatic—a goal that is constantly pursued rather than an immediate reality or fixed ideal. (p. 273)

Not only is Confucius’ concept of change an intrinsically moral one (with *ren* at the center), it is also necessarily *social* in nature. There is a symbiotic relationship between helping oneself and helping others to observe *li*. As noted by Confucius, “In helping oneself take a stand, one helps others to take their stand; in desiring to reach a goal, one helps others to reach their goal” (6.30). Confucius sees human beings not as individualistic, atomistic, or pre-social, but as social beings situated within a community (Tan, 2013b). It follows that it is impossible, according to Confucius, for one to cultivate oneself without performing one’s social roles and functioning as an active member of society. Confucius’ worldview may be represented by four concentric circles, with moral self-cultivation in the innermost circle—that is, starting with the self—before extending to one’s home (parents and siblings), one’s community (peers, juniors, and elders), and finally the world (general society) (Tan, 2013a; Tan & Tan, 2014). The entire self-cultivating process requires one to observe *li* (12.1, 12.2), love learning (1.14, 8.13), learn extensively (9.2), and creatively adapt and integrate the old and the new (1.1).

Conclusions

The preceding shows that Confucius demonstrated and advocated a moral and social conception of creativity that emphasises evolutionary rather than revolutionary changes. An examination of the teachings and example of Confucius helps us to understand why incremental changes built upon the wisdom of the past, rather than a clean break from tradition, are favored by the Confucian perspective. Creativity, for Confucius, is necessarily moral in the sense that everything that a person thinks, feels, and does must proceed from *ren* and be aligned with *li*. Creativity is also necessarily social in the sense that human beings can only successfully cultivate

themselves morally when they do so inter-dependently through a nexus of relationships. Confucius can thus be described as a “conservative innovator” (Tan, 2014). Desiring to judiciously select the best of Chinese cultural tradition, he creatively modified and enhanced existing cultural meanings for the betterment of human beings. It is noteworthy that research has pointed out that creative persons can be both rebellious and conservative, willing to innovate and take risks while retaining the respect they have for their tradition and culture (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Confucius is a creative person from an Eastern perspective of creativity, where evolutionary changes with moral and social dimensions are valued and propagated.

Confucius’ teachings and modelling of creativity may come as a surprise to someone who believes or presupposes that Confucianism stifles or threatens the development of creativity—a point mentioned at the start of this essay. On the one hand, it is correct to observe that the students’ development of creativity across East Asian societies has been inhibited due to, among other factors, Confucian values and practices such as authoritarianism, rote-learning, and over-emphasis on obedience, filial piety, and loyalty. A solution for policymakers and educators who wish to foster creativity in their students is to return to the thoughts and example of Confucius himself. Far from advocating political oppression, rote-memorization, and unquestioning obedience, Confucius promoted humane and benevolent human relationships and eschewed rote-learning in favor of personal appropriation and flexible application of concepts learned.

On the other hand, caution is necessary when interpreting the lack or low level of creativity in East Asian students and when imposing a Western conception of creativity on non-Western contexts. It may well be that the “creativity” that was allegedly absent in East Asian classrooms exists but is more evolutionary than revolutionary. For the same reason, a person who subscribes to a revolutionary conception of creativity may not think that Confucius qualifies as a creative genius. Given the plural and competing definitions of creativity, there is a need for researchers and educators to acknowledge the diverse conceptions of creativity across societies and the different cultural influences. More research could also be carried out to examine, interrogate, and compare the multiple and competing conceptions of creativity across and within cultures.

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