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Beyond Rote-Memorisation: Confucius' Concept of Thinking

Abstract

Confucian education is often associated with rote-memorisation that is characterised by sheer repetition of facts with no or little understanding of the content learnt. But does Confucian education necessarily promote rote-memorisation? What does Confucius himself have to say about education? This paper aims to answer the above questions by examining Confucius' concept of *si* (thinking or mindfulness) based on a textual study of the *Analects*. It is argued that Confucius' concept of *si* primarily involves an active inquiry into issues that concern one's everyday life, promotes inferential thinking, and facilitates self-examination. Far from advocating rote-memorisation, Confucius highlights the need for us to take ownership of our own learning, engage in higher order thinking, and reflectively apply the lessons learnt in our lives.

Keywords: rote-memorisation, Confucius, education, thinking

Introduction

A common perception of *Confucian education* is that it is predominantly about rote-memorisation – a form of learning that is characterised by sheer repetition of facts with no or little understanding of the content learnt. Such a perception originated from the time of ancient China where aspiring Confucian scholars memorised and regurgitated copious pages of the classics with the hope of acing the imperial civil exams. Accompanying rote-memorisation are other associated terms that supposedly characterises Confucian education, such as textual transmission, didactic teaching, passive learning, and the suppression of independent thinking, individuality, and higher-order thinking.

A typical view is expressed by Aoki (2008): “In contrast to Western education in which students are encouraged to engage in debate, Confucian education tends to emphasise rote learning and memorisation” and that “studying means finding a good teacher and imitating his words and deeds” (p. 35). Han and Scull (2010) posit that Confucian Heritage Culture' (CHC) countries (Asian societies that are apparently influenced by Confucian culture) share the following key philosophical tenets and schooling practices (p. 603): Rote memorisation; transmission of knowledge via teacher-centredness; uncommon usage of the interactive process; top-down method; bias towards obedience: students do not ask questions and interrupt the flow of instruction; they often talk only when asked; and more hours of homework and cram schools after school (also see Kember & Gow, 1991; Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Kim, 2005a, b; Aguinis & Roth, 2005; Hui, 2005; Aoki, 2008; Han & Scull, 2010). Accompanying Confucian education is an image of Confucius as a bookish, stern and stoic master (*shifu*) trapped in the milieu of ancient China.

Rote-memorisation is often associated with the *surface learning approach*. This approach refers to the intention to be able to reproduce content as required; passive acceptance of ideas and information; lack of recognition of guiding principals or patterns; and

focussing learning on assessment requirements (Harlen & James, 1997, p. 368). The surface learning approach is contrasted with the *deep learning approach* that refers to an intention to develop personal understanding; active interaction with the content, particularly in relating new ideas to previous knowledge and experience; linking ideas together using integrating principles; and relating evidence to conclusions (Harlen & James, 1997, p. 368; also see Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1984; [Crooks, 1988](#)).

The view of Confucian education, and by implication, Chinese education, as promoting rote-memorisation contributes to some extent to ‘the paradox of the Chinese learner’. John B. Biggs explains the paradox: “westerners saw Chinese students as rote learning massive amounts of information in fierce exam-dominated classrooms – yet in international comparisons, students in the Confucian heritage classrooms greatly outperformed western students learning in ‘progressive’ western classrooms” (as cited in [Chan & Rao, 2009](#), p. x, for further readings on the paradox, see [Biggs, 1996](#); [Biggs & Watkins, 1996](#); [Chan & Rao, 2009](#)). Commenting on the general learning style of Chinese/Asian students, Dunbar (1988, p. 12), avers as follows:

Learning is seen as possessing the ability to reproduce exactly what is taught in identical form. This "reproductive orientation" manifests in rote memorisation of facts, formulae, rules, tracts, and schema. Unifying principles are usually overlooked, and emphasis on detail is encouraged. Learners are conditioned to accept and respect what the teacher presents as correct. The focus is on acquiring propositional knowledge and demonstrating acquisition by outright recall (Dunbar, 1988, p. 12, cited in [Kember & Gow, 1991](#), p. 117).

This paradox is brought into sharp relief in recent years, as exemplified in the results of the 2009 International Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where the top four performers were all ‘Confucian Heritage Culture’ (CHC) societies (Shanghai, Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) (OECD, 2010).¹ *But does Confucian education necessarily promote rote-memorisation? What does Confucius have to say about education?*

This paper aims to answer the above questions by examining Confucius’ concept of *si* (thinking or mindfulness) based on a textual study of the *Analects*. Literally means ‘compiled sayings’, the *Analects* is a collection of the sayings and conduct of Confucius and his students. The process of collating Confucius’ teachings started shortly after his death; his sayings were recorded in little ‘books’, which were subsequently collated to make up what we know today as the *Analects* (Ames & Rosemont, 1998).² All the English translations of the verses in the *Analects* cited in this paper are done by me, unless otherwise stated. In discussing Confucius’ educational concepts, I shall make references to the surface learning approach that is associated with rote-memorisation, and the deep learning approach which, I shall argue, is propagated by Confucius.

Confucius’ Concept of Thinking (*si*)

Confucius’ concept of thinking is linked to his vision for learning or *xue*. Confucius exhorts all to “learn as if you cannot catch up, and as if you fear losing it” (8.17). He praises those ancient scholars who learned “for their own sake” and disapproves of scholars of his time who learn “for the sake of others” (14.24). To learn ‘for the sake of others’ is to study for the sake of receiving praises and rewards from others. In contrast, learning for one’s own sake entails two things.

First, it is about *deriving joy in learning* rather than obtaining personal material rewards from such learning. The love of learning is emphasised by Confucius: “Be firmly committed

to love learning” (8.13). The need for all learners to love learning implies that one cannot simply learn via rote-memorisation without any cognitive and affective involvement. Instead, what Confucius advocates is a personal engagement with and appreciation of the purpose of learning.

Secondly, learning for one’s own sake does not preclude learning for a higher purpose. It also entails achieving one’s mission of *broadening the Way (dao)*. Confucius remarks that the noble or ideal person (*junzi*) “learns for the sake of the Way” (19.7). He adds that “it is human beings who are able to broaden the Way, not the Way that broadens human beings” (15.29). The word ‘broaden’ refers to the act of realising, perpetuating, and promoting the Way on earth to future generations. 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” (Ames & Rosemont, 1988, p. 45). The possibility of broadening the Way signifies that the Way is not pre-determined or transcendental; human beings are empowered to realise the Way through their collective actions on earth. Confucius’ faith in the ability of human beings to broaden the Way and change the course of history explains why Confucius’ teachings have been described as humanistic. Given Confucius’ emphasis of loving learning and learning to broaden the Way, it is not his intention for his learners to rote-memorise without any personal understanding, appreciation and application of the content learnt.

Against a backdrop of Confucius’ concept of learning, let us examine his view on *si* (thinking or mindfulness). The word *si* does not just mean ‘thinking’ in the sense of a simple thought process. Rather, it is a broad term that encompasses a range of thought processes such as understanding, reflection, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, making connections, drawing analogies, making inferences, forming judgments and so on – in short, a ‘taxonomy of thinking’.³ To distinguish ‘thinking’ as *si* from ‘thinking’ as a simple thought process, I shall refer to the former as *si* in the rest of the paper. *Si* goes in tandem with *xue* (learning), as noted by Confucius:

2.15 The Master said, “Learning without *si* leads to bewilderment; *si* without learning leads to perilousness.”

Confucius believes that a person who learns without *si* is perplexed as she has not sufficiently internalised and made sense of what she has learnt. Conversely, a person who thinks a lot but does not have sufficiently broad knowledge is vulnerable to danger, as her actions are not adequately informed and guided by a knowledge base. *Si* therefore serves to educate or lead a person forth by enabling her to reflect, internalise and appropriate what she has learnt.

What does Confucius’ concept of *si* entail? There are three key characteristics, the first one being that *si* involves a process where *one actively inquires about issues that concern one’s everyday life*. Confucius himself demonstrates this in one incident recorded in the *Analects*:

3.15 When the Master went to the Grand Ancestral Hall, he asked questions about everything. Someone remarked, “Who said this son of a man from the Zou village understands normative behaviour (*li*)? On entering the Grand Ancestral Hall he asks questions about everything.” When the Master heard of this, he said, “The asking of questions is itself *li*.”

What is interesting about that episode is that Confucius’ asking of questions was not the usual practice of people during his time, nor was such a behaviour positively construed as observing *li*.⁴ Confucius was instead labeled by an observer as ignorant of *li*. By countering

that the asking of questions is itself *li*, Confucius was pointing out the need for *si* where an inquirer autonomously and actively participating in and making sense of something.⁵

The importance of asking questions leads Confucius to express his disappointment with his disciple Yanhui for not raising any questions to Confucius' teaching. Confucius laments that "Yanhui is of no help to me; he does not dislike anything I say" (11.4).⁶ Besides inquiring by asking questions, Confucius also models the quality of *si* by seeking out the answers. He describes his passion and persistence in pursuing a satisfactory answer as follows: "A peasant asked me something and [my mind] was empty; I attacked [the question] from both ends until I got everything out of it" (9.8). The above shows that far from recommending a passive acceptance of ideas and information, Confucius encourages active interaction with the content through critical and persistent questioning. It is noteworthy that *si* is not directed at some academic or esoteric knowledge but issues that arise in one's everyday life. Indeed, the *Analects* records many instances of Confucius and his disciples asking and answering questions concerning one's normative behaviour and relationships with other people (e.g. see 2.7, 2.19, 2.23, 5.4, 6.3, 6.8, 6.26, 11.7, 11.16, 12.3, 12.4).

The second characteristic of *si* is that it promotes *inferential thinking*. This may be achieved in three main ways: building upon what one has learnt, making connections, and forming personal judgements about people and things. First, Confucius emphasises the need to extend one's learning by *building upon what one has learnt*. He asserts the need to "be aware of what one lacks daily, and do not forget what one has acquired monthly" (19.5). Confucius himself demonstrates "listens widely, selects what is good and follows it" (7.28). The 'selection of what is good' presupposes an ability to make value judgments regarding what one has learnt, and the ability to analyse and evaluate lessons learnt so as to arrive at an informed decision. All these activities require active and higher-order thinking on the learner's part. In another passage, Confucius explains how he extends his own learning by building on what he has learnt:

15.3 The Master said, "Zigong, do you think I am the kind of person who has learnt widely and remembered it all? Zigong said, "Yes. Is it not so?" The Master said, "No. I bind it all together with one thread."

The 'one thread' mentioned in the passage is explicated in another passage (4.15); it refers to doing one's best (*zhong*) as well as demonstrating empathy and reciprocity (*shu*). What Confucius means is that he has processed what he has learned and synthesised them into a coherent whole through personal reflection.

It is therefore not surprising that Confucius expects his disciples to do likewise by extending their thinking based on what they have learnt. Confucius encourages his students to learn the Songs (poems from the Book of Songs) because "the Songs can give you inspiration, observation skill, ability to live with others, and means to express grievances" (17.9). At first glance, we may wonder how the Songs, being mere poems, can help a person to achieve the above. However, Confucius' claims make sense when we understand that Confucius is encouraging the young people to go beyond rote learning to reflect on the implications and application of the poems to their daily lives. Contemplating the literary beauty of the poems and drawing ethical lessons from them will inspire a person to appreciate life, live ethically, acquire the skill of observation by drawing connections between the poems and the real world, and improve her communication ability by using words appropriately, be it to foster harmony or express grievances. All the above outcomes are possible *only if* the learner is able to *si* or reflect critically on the poems.

The second way to extend one's learning is by *making connections*. This is highlighted by Confucius:

7.8 The Master said, “I do not enlighten a person who is not striving [to understand]; I do not provide [the words to a person] who is not already struggling to speak. If I have raised one [corner] and the person does not come back with the other three [corners], I will not [teach that person] again.”

In the above verse, Confucius stresses the importance of self-motivation in learning. He expects his students to strive to understand what they learn and seek to express themselves with the right words. Rather than spoon-feeding, Confucius asserts that a teacher should only provide the initial point of learning and prompt the student to draw their own conclusions subsequently. Deep learning is therefore encouraged as the learner is exhorted to actively reflect and relate new ideas to previous knowledge and experience. To further illustrate Confucius’ stress on extending one’s learning through higher-order thinking, I shall give two examples of inferential thinking from Confucius’ disciples. The first example is an exchange between Zigong and Confucius on *li* and the Way (*dao*):

1.15 Zigong said, “‘Poor without being ostentatious, wealthy without being arrogant’. What do you think [of this saying]?” The Master said, “It is acceptable, [but] not as good as ‘Poor yet enjoy the Way, wealthy yet love *li*’.” Zigong said, “The Book of Song says, ‘Like bone carved and polished, like jade cut and ground’. Is this not what you have in mind?” The Master said, “Zigong, only with someone like you can one discuss the Songs; you know what is to come based on what has been said.”

Upon learning from Confucius the need to enjoy the Way and love *li*, Zigong was able to relate this teaching to a line from the Song regarding bone and jade. Just as the carving and polishing of bone and cutting and grounding of jade are laborious, enjoying the Way and loving *li* require a long drawn process of self-cultivation. Confucius’ compliment to Zigong that he ‘knows what is to come based on what has been said’ confirms that Zigong has demonstrated inferential thinking.

The second example involves another disciple, Zixia, who demonstrated his ability to draw an analogy based on another line from the Book of Songs:

3.8 Zixia asked, “‘Her entrancing smile with dimples, Her beautiful eyes so clear, Unadorned upon which to paint’. What does this mean?” The Master replied, “The plain base comes first, then the colours are applied.” Zixia said, “Just like *li* that comes after?” The Master replied, “Zixia, you have stimulated my thoughts. It is only with someone like you that one can discuss the Songs.”

Upon learning from Confucius about the meaning of a line from the Book of Songs, Zixia correctly infers that *li* comes after one’s basic quality of *yi* (appropriateness), just as colours (analogous to *yi*) are painted on a plain canvas (analogous to *li*). Like Zigong, Zixia’s effort is met with Confucius’ praise for his demonstration of inferential thinking. We see that both Zigong and Zixia are able to build upon what they have learnt, thereby extending their learning. They are examples of learners who are able to infer the other three corners from the one corner given by the teacher (7.8). We see in both examples Confucius’ aim to spur his students to engage in deep learning by linking ideas together using integrating principles, and relating evidence to conclusions.

The third way to extend one’s learning is by *forming personal judgments about people and things*:

15.28 The Master said, “When the multitude hates a person, you must examine the matter; when the multitude love a person, you must examine the matter.”

Confucius’ point here is that we should not base our judgment merely on other people’s opinions of a person. Rather, we need to investigate the matter ourselves and draw our own conclusions about the person from available evidence. Not to do so and to simply go with the majority is to commit the fallacy of *ad populum*. This ability to make up one’s mind is intricately linked to *yi* (appropriateness or rightness) that marks a noble or ideal person (*junzi*). A *junzi*, “in his dealings in the world, is not for or against anything; he goes with what is appropriate (*yi*)” (4.10). Appropriateness is about exercising one’s discernment and discretion so that one knows how to carry oneself and make appropriate judgments or decision in a particular context. This would not be possible if the person merely rote-memorises *li* through surface learning and is unable to think for herself.

Forming judgments extends to the observance of *li*. We should reflect on the relevance of specific practices of *li* and modify them if necessary, based on ethical considerations. We see this modeled by Confucius in the following verse that was cited earlier in the chapter on *li*:

9.3 The Master said, “A ceremonial cap of linen is prescribed by *li*. Nowadays, a silk cap is used instead; this is frugal and I follow the majority on this. To prostrate oneself before ascending [the steps to the hall] is prescribed by *li*. Nowadays, one prostrates oneself only after ascending [the hall]; this is arrogant. Although this goes against the majority, I prostrate myself before ascending.

Here we see an example of how Confucius exercises judgment in two contrasting ways. In the first instance, he supports modifying a practice of *li* – substituting ceremonial cap made of linen with those made of silk. In another instance, however, he opposes a prevailing practice and insists on adhering to the traditional practice of *li* by prostrating oneself before ascending the steps to the hall. It is instructive that Confucius’ judgment is not made arbitrarily or influenced by his personal preferences. Rather, he bases his claims on the ethical standards of frugality (in the first instance) and reverence (in the second instance).

The third characteristic of *si* is that it facilitates *self-examination*. This characteristic follows logically from the other two: one actively reflects, questions and extends one’s learning so as to lead to self-improvement. That the observance of *li* involves not just one’s behaviours but one’s attitudes and values implies that we need to constantly examine our own thoughts, feelings and actions. Confucius exhorts all to self-examine: “When you meet someone who is worthy, consider being his equal; when you meet someone who is not worthy, look inward and examine yourself” (4.17). A disciple of Confucius heeds his advice by doing the following:

1.4 Master Zeng said: “Every day I examine myself on three counts: Have I done my best in my undertakings on behalf of others? Have I been trustworthy in my interactions with friends? Have I failed to put into practice what was passed to me?”

By examining oneself whole-heartedly, one is motivated and reminded to correct one’s shortcomings and observe *li* more faithfully. Such a person is not anxious or fearful as she has nothing to be ashamed of, as noted by Confucius in his portrait of a *junzi*:

12.4 Sima Niu asked about the *junzi*. Confucius said, “The *junzi* is not anxious or fearful. “Does being a *junzi* just mean not being anxious or fearful?” The Master said, “If you examine yourself and find nothing to be ashamed of, why be worried or fearful?”

Overall, we see that *si* demands the learner's utmost attention and devotion to continuous study and self-improvement. We can make three further observations about Confucius' concept of *si*. First, although the word 'thinking' tends to be primarily associated with the cognitive and separated from the affective in the Western tradition, it has no such meaning or connotation in the Confucian tradition. It is important to note that ancient Chinese thinkers did not regard the body and mind as essentially different kinds of existence (Hall & Ames, 1987). Ames and Rosemont (1998) posit that "there are no altogether disembodied thoughts for Confucius, nor any raw feelings altogether lacking (what in English would be called) 'cognitive content'" (p. 56). Unaffected by Cartesian dualism, *si*, for Confucius, necessarily involves both the heart and the mind or 'heart-mind' where *rationality and emotion are integrated*. *Si* is "an emotion of longing, incorporating within itself a value judgment that something is desirable as well as a desire to obtain and achieve it" (Tan, 2005, pp. 420-421). Uniting one's reason and the passions in *xin* (heart-mind), Confucius encourages all to "set your heart-mind on the Way" (7.6) and that we could follow our "heart-mind's desires without overstepping the line" (2.4).

Second, Confucius' concept of *si* helps us to understand why memorisation has a definite place in the Confucian tradition. Confucius expects his students to learn and commit to memory the grammar rules, poems, and historical facts when learning the 'six arts'. Memorisation is necessary as it is evidence of content mastery that provides a firm foundation for *si*. According to Confucius, *si* cannot occur in a vacuum and needs to be accompanied by learning. That is why he shares his experience that "I once went without food the whole day and without sleep the whole night by focusing on *si*; that was not beneficial; it is better to spend the time learning" (15.31). To borrow the analogy from 3.8, one needs to have a plain base (subject content) to which the colours (*si*) can be applied. Returning to 3.8 and 1.15, Confucius' disciples had to learn the Songs first before they could draw inferences from them and connect the Songs to their experiences. As noted by Kim (2003), Confucius' concept of learning consists of two phases: the accumulation of the materials of knowledge from direct and indirect experience, followed by reflection [*si*] on the materials of knowledge in order to synthesise, systematise and integrate them into oneself as wisdom.

We should not, however, confuse memorisation with rote-memorisation. Nowhere in the Analects does Confucius advocate rote learning; on the contrary, he cautions against rote-memorisation:

13.5 The Master said, "If a person can recite three hundred Songs but unable to perform an official duty entrusted to him, and unable to exercise his initiative when sent abroad, what good are the many Songs to him?"

Confucius is not asserting that memorising the Songs is useless; such an interpretation would contradict other verses where he encourages his students to learn the Songs (c.f. 16.13, 17.9, 17.10). His point, rather, is that one should memorise the Songs *with understanding* so as to draw ethical lessons from them that can be applied to one's life.

The third observation about *si* concerns the relationship between *si* and the Zhou *li*. Given that *si* involves an active process of reflecting, questioning and judgement-making, can *si* be applied to the Zhou *li*? On the one hand, we see that Confucius does not make radical critique upon fundamental beliefs like the Zhou *li* through *si*. It is telling that Confucius declares: "I transmit but do not make; I trust in and love antiquity" (7.1). However, this does not mean that Confucius advocates a blind adherence to tradition. He applies *si* to antiquity by not limiting the normative beliefs and practices to the Zhou dynasty. While favouring

Zhou *li*, Confucius also selectively promotes following the calendar of the Xia, riding on the carriage of the Yin, wearing the ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and playing the *shao* and *wu*. (c.f. 15.11). We have also noted how he was prepared to question and modified certain practices of *li* (c.f. 9.3). I suggest describing Confucius as a ‘conservative innovator’ in his advocacy of the Zhou *li*: he values and propagates the best of Chinese tradition albeit critically and selectively through the lens of *si*. In short, *si* involves “both the acquisition and entertainment of existing meaning and the creative adaption and extension of this meaning to maximise the possibilities of one’s own circumstances” (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 48).

Conclusion

An active and student-centred form of teaching does not mean that Confucius rejects memorisation qua memorisation. We have noted that Confucius advocates thinking (*si*) to be based on a firm foundation of learning (*xue*). In other words, critical reflection and other forms of higher order thinking are efficacious only if one has acquired sufficient content knowledge. But Confucius does *not* recommend rote-memorisation as this will not enable a student to take ownership for her own learning, engage in higher order thinking, and reflectively apply the lessons learnt in her life. Confucius’ educational enterprise of living one’s life in accordance to *li* entails that understanding and appropriating what one has memorised is essential.

The above characteristics that parallel Confucius’ teachings – memorisation with understanding, and thinking built upon a firm knowledge base – may account for the academic success of East Asian students in international assessments. As mentioned, the top performers in PISA are all East Asian societies (Shanghai, Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) with strong Confucian influences. A Chinese style of teaching that combines memorisation with deep understanding brings us back to ‘the paradox of the Chinese learner’ mentioned at the start of the paper. This paradox is resolved when we note that memorisation and repeated practice for the Chinese students do not necessarily mean that they are learning by rote or that they lack deep understanding of the subject matter. On the contrary, memorisation (but not rote-learning as it implies a lack of understanding), is part of a strategy for the Chinese students to achieve deep understanding, logical thinking, and strong application. Such a learning approach is consistent with that recommended by Confucius himself.⁷ Ryan and Louie (2007), in their critique of the ‘Confucian-Western’ dichotomy, rightly caution against viewing terms such as critical thinking, deep learning, lifelong and life-wide learning as the outcomes of ‘Western’ education, and assuming that students from Confucian Heritage Cultures are passive, dependent, surface/rote learners, prone to plagiarism and lacking critical thinking.

Confucius’ vision and practice of education is not about rote memorisation where one learns with little engagement, personal understanding and real-life application. He champions the deep learning approach through a broad-based and integrated curriculum that aims to develop the students’ personal understanding of and active interaction with the content. Furthermore, Confucius’ concept of *si* involves active reflection and inquiry, extending one’s learning through higher-order thinking, and self-examination. Far from advocating rote-memorisation, Confucius highlights the need for us to take ownership of our own learning, engage in higher order thinking, and reflectively apply the lessons learnt in our lives.

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Notes

¹ Besides Shanghai, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, two other East Asian societies, Japan and Taiwan, also performed well in PISA 2009. Japan was ranked 8th in reading, 9th in mathematics, and 5th in science while Taiwan was ranked 23rd in reading, 5th in mathematics, and 12th in science. For more information, see OECD (2010).

² As the *Analects* was compiled a few centuries after the death of Confucius, it is not surprising that there have been controversies over its authenticity. This is a controversial debate that is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that I share the views of Slingerland (2001), Shun (1993), and Li (2007), that we should assume that all the chapters in the *Analects* represent Confucius' teachings, and that we can obtain a generally coherent reading from the chapters. In any case, my focus is not so much on Confucius as a historical figure but as a philosophical figure, whose sayings attributed to him were passed down to us in the *Analects*. Here, I agree with Li (2007) that "if such attempts [to read the text in a coherent manner] cannot be taken as a reduction to Confucius' own thought, they at least can be seen as reconstructions that may help us understand Confucianism" (p. 324).

³ Ames and Rosemont (1998) translate *si* in 2.15 as 'reflection' while Lau (1979) and Slingerland (2003) translate it as 'thinking'. I agree with Ames and Rosemont that *si* involves reflection but I do not think that it is confined to that. As explained in the text, *si*

encompasses a range of advanced thought processes such as understanding, reflection, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, making connections, drawing analogies, making inferences, forming judgments and so on.

⁴ Commenting on 3.15, Hagen (2010) notes that “Confucius’s conduct was ritually appropriate (*li*) in the sense that this was a situation in which being inquisitive, and genuinely acting accordingly, expressed a proper sense-of-ritual. More generally, the point could be that one has to be deferential when one is in unfamiliar surroundings. Putting it this way usefully blurs the distinction between rule following and exemplifying a cultivated disposition” (p. 7).

⁵ It should be acknowledged that Confucius’ questions in 3.15 are not critical in nature but fact-finding type of questions that serve to express his interest to learn more about the ceremonial rituals. One may thus deem this example weak, as Confucius’ questions do not demonstrate critical thinking in terms of say, questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence and offering alternatives. While I see the validity of this critique of Confucius’ questions, I think that we should also bear in mind the historical-cultural context of Confucius’ time. The very act of asking questions by Confucius was novel and radical in ancient China, as evident from the surprised response of the observer in the same verse. Confucius should therefore be given the credit for promoting and pioneering a culture of inquiry in ancient China that is in accordance with *li*.

⁶ Lest we think that Confucius concludes that Yanhui is a poor student, we should note that Confucius goes on to praise him for putting into practice what he has learnt: “I speak with Yanhui the whole day, he never disagrees with me and seems stupid. When he withdraws and I examine what he does in private, [I] find that] he is able to illustrate [what I have said], Yanhui is not stupid at all” (2.9). Confucius’ point is that he prefers his students to be actively engaged in learning by asking questions *as well as* applying what they have learnt in their lives.

⁷ Here I am not making a stronger claim that East Asian students are explicitly adopting Confucius’ teaching approach that accounts for their academic success. This claim requires further empirical research for its confirmation. What I am arguing, instead, is a weaker claim that the teaching and learning approaches common in ‘Confucian Heritage Culture’ (CHC) societies are consistent with Confucius’ views on learning and thinking. I have further argued that there is a philosophical justification for this form of teaching and learning when we examine Confucius’ views in the *Analects*.