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**DRAFT**

**A Confucian Perspective of Self-Cultivation in Learning:  
Its Implications for Self-Directed Learning**

**Abstract**

This article explores a Confucian perspective of self-cultivation in learning and its implications for self-directed learning. Focussing on two key Confucian texts, *Xueji* (Record of Learning) and *Xunzi*, this essay expounds the purpose, content, process and essence of self-cultivation in learning. From a Confucian viewpoint, self-cultivation is aimed at morally transforming the learners so that they can realise the Way (*dao*). The learning process involves being committed to studying, improving oneself by observing rituals and living ethically, and being guided by one's teacher. Throughout the learning process, both the independence and inter-dependence of the self are emphasised. The article further discusses two major implications from a Confucian interpretation of self-cultivation in learning for self-directed learning. What is recommended is a model of self-directed learning that is underpinned by a shared moral vision of the good and underscores the collective resources and wisdom to promote individual and group learning.

**Keywords: Confucianism, self-cultivation, learning, self-directed learning**

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**Introduction**

Self-directed Learning (hereinafter SDL) is integral to adult and continuing education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as evident in its inclusion in a number of learning frameworks, such as the 'AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner', 'P21 Framework Life and Career Skills', and 'ISTE Standards for Students' (Fahnoe & Mishra, 2013). What is less well-known is that the cultivation of self is a major theme in Confucianism. Questions such as what kind of person should one be, and how should one cultivate oneself to become the person one aspires to be, have been scrutinised and debated by Confucian scholars for centuries. What then is self-cultivation from a Confucian perspective? How is self-cultivation relevant to self-directed learning in the modern world? This article aims to answer these two questions by focussing on two key Confucian texts, *Xueji* (Record of Learning) and *Xunzi*. The first part of the article introduces the concept of SDL. This is followed by a discussion of a Confucian perspective of self-cultivation in learning. The last part of the article delineates the contemporary implications of a Confucian interpretation of self-cultivation in learning for self-directed learning.

## Introduction to Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

The concept of SDL is not new as it can be traced back to the pioneering works of educators such as Malcolm Knowles (1975) and Allen Tough (1979). Despite its varied definitions, interpretations and forms, researchers generally agree that SDL foregrounds the learner's conscious acceptance of responsibility for learning (Guglielmino, 2014). A self-directed learner is one who “takes responsibility for his or her own learning, and more often chooses or influences the learning objectives, activities, resources, priorities, and levels of energy expenditure than does the other-directed learner” (Guglielmino, 2008, p. 2). Rather than reducing SDL to a single definition, it is more accurate to see SDL as a multi-faceted concept comprising various dimensions, components, philosophies, perspectives and degrees of self-direction (Kerka, 1999). For example, SDL can be understood and explored from the dimensions of personal autonomy, learner-control, self-management, autodidaxy, self-monitoring, and/or motivation (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1989; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Caffarella, 1993; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997; Song & Hill, 2007). Highlighting the fluid nature of SDL, Caffarella (1993) posits that “the choice of being self-directed and acting in an autonomous manner in a learning situation is not an all-or-nothing position” as a self-directed person “may choose not to exhibit or pursue this characteristic at certain times” (pp. 29-30). SDL activities typically take the form of one or more of the following: setting own learning goals, identifying appropriate learning resources, selecting appropriate learning strategies, monitoring achievement of learning outcomes, integrating material from different sources, managing time, and monitoring effectiveness of own study habits (Towle & Cottrell, 1996, p. 357).

Kerka (1999) identifies two main schools of thought for SDL: the ‘individual’ and ‘collective’. Accordingly, the former emphasises the autonomous and independent individual who chooses to learn for the sake of personal growth, while the latter underscores the social construction of knowledge and the social context of learning. One’s position with respect to the school of thought would determine the extent to which one values the role and contribution of the individual in planning, carrying out, and evaluating one’s learning experiences. Knowles (1975), for instance, appears to argue for the ‘individual’ school of thought when he defines SDL as “a process in which individuals take the initiative *without the help of others* in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18, as cited in Mezirow, 1985, p. 17, italics added).<sup>1</sup>

## A Confucian Perspective of Self-Cultivation in Learning

It is helpful to provide an overview of the development and significant features of Confucianism as a prelude to our discussion of self-cultivation in learning. Confucianism comprises a plurality of historical, political, philosophical and socio-cultural traditions that are traced back to Confucius (*Kong Fuzi*) (551-479 BCE). It includes not just the ideas of Confucius but also those of his followers and proponents such as Mencius and Xunzi, the Neo-Confucians, policymakers in East Asian societies, and contemporary Confucian educators. It is important to point out that not all the ideas and practices propagated by Confucius originate from him. Instead, many Confucian principles belong to an ancient tradition of thought that owes its genesis to the sages (*shengren*) or sage-kings (*shengwang*) such as King Wen, King Wu and the Duke of Zhou (Hutton, 2014). It follows that Confucianism is “more a tradition generally rooted in Chinese culture and nurtured by Confucius and Confucians rather than a new religion created, or a new value system initiated,

by Confucius himself alone” (Yao, 2000, p. 17). What we call ‘Confucians’ today were known as *ru* (cultivated or learned persons) who embarked on learning as the proper path of the *shi* (knight) class in ancient China (Knoblock, 1988; Hutton, 2014).

In terms of the significant features of Confucianism, Tu (1998) identifies two major strands: the political and philosophical. Political Confucianism focuses on the politicisation of Confucian ethical values in the service of other non-ethical purposes; philosophical Confucianism, on the other hand, centres on the Confucian intent to infuse politics with morality through cultivation of the self (Tu, 1984). Two dominant and perennial themes in Confucianism are learning and morality. Learning refers to the study and transmission of ancient classics such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Book of Odes*. Confucius is well-known for editing, commenting, teaching and modelling the teachings in the ancient classics (Yao, 2000). As for morality, virtues such as humanity (*ren*), normative behaviours (*li*), rightness (*yi*), trustworthiness (*xin*) and courage (*yong*) are the foundational doctrines of Confucianism. The primary concern of Confucius “was not academic, not mind oriented, but moral in nature” and that “the Confucian model is about moral striving” (Li, 2003, pp. 146-147).

The pre-eminence of learning and morality in Confucian traditions explains why self-cultivation and learning are intertwined in the Confucian tradition. Tu (1985) states that “learning in the Confucian perspective is basically moral self-cultivation”, with the latter referring to “a gradual process of building up one’s character by making oneself receptive to the symbolic resources of one’s own culture and responsive to the sharable values of one’s own society” (p. 68). A Confucian classic *The Great Learning* highlights self-cultivation as the foundation for order in the family, state and the world (Kim & Kim, 2014). Another Confucian classic *The Mean* echoes the message that “one who knows how to cultivate himself knows how to govern men; and one who knows how to govern men knows how to govern the states and families of the world” (de Bary & Bloom, 1999, p. 337). Self-cultivation is a primary interest not only in Confucianism but also in other schools of thought in ancient China. A Daoist text *Daodejing* teaches that an individual’s inner power would become real if such a person cultivates the Way in oneself (Knoblock, 1988). The attainment of Buddhahood through individual self-cultivation is also stressed in Buddhism (for details of specific Buddhist doctrines, see de Bary & Bloom, 1999).

Among the Confucian texts, two stand out for their direct and in-depth elucidation of self-cultivation in learning. The first text is *Xueji* (Record of Learning), a short educational treatise that is part of Confucian classic *Liji* (Book of Rites).<sup>ii</sup> It was likely to have been written during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) or the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). It is unclear who the author of the text is and scholars have suggested that the author could be a disciple of Mencius or Han dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu, among others (Gao, 2006). The ‘school’ mentioned in the *Xueji* probably referred to the imperial academy for adult learners who were being prepared for political office. The second text is *Xunzi* that was written by Xun Kuang who was better known as Xunzi (Master Xun). Born about 310 BCE. and an eminent Confucian scholar during his time, his importance in classical Chinese tradition is comparable to that of Aristotle in the Greek world (Knoblock, 1988). Living during the Warring States period and having witnessed the political and social chaos, Xunzi believed that the solution was moral self-cultivation for all, particularly the rulers. Due to space constraint, this article shall only discuss passages from the *Xueji* and *Xunzi* that are directly relevant to the theme of self-cultivation in learning. All the English translations of the *Xueji* and *Xunzi* cited in this paper are from Wong (1976) and Hutton (2014) respectively, unless otherwise stated.

A key passage in the *Xueji* that links self-cultivation in learning is IX that states that “the good student greatly exerted himself while studying”.<sup>iii</sup> The same passage elaborates

that cultivation is attained when one “respects your vocation, be orderly and exert yourself”. The word ‘yuxue’, translated by Wong as ‘greatly exerted himself while studying’, is translated variously as ‘pursues his studies’ (Legge, 1885) and ‘invest themselves utterly in their studies’ (Yang et al., 2012). Despite variations among the translators, the consensus is that successful learning is not guaranteed and depends ultimately on oneself. In other words, self-cultivation is achieved only when the learner puts in substantial and sustained effort in studying. Returning to Tu’s definition of moral self-cultivation, self-cultivation in the *Xueji* refers to the learner putting in individual effort to build up one’s character in the imperial academy. Further insights on the Confucian concept of self-cultivated learning can be gleaned when we return to Tu (1985)’s description of moral self-cultivation. Tu’s insight serves as a useful theoretical framework in terms of the purpose, content, process, and essence of learning from a Confucian perspective. We shall examine each of these aspects of learning with reference to relevant passages from the *Xueji* and *Xunzi*.

First, the *purpose* of self-cultivation is to build up one’s character. The word ‘character’ reminds us that learning, from a Confucian perspective, is fundamentally a *moral* endeavour. This point is clearly stated in the opening passage of the *Xueji*: “If the ruler wishes to transform the people and perfect their customs, he must indeed rely on education”. The motivation of a good ruler, according to the *Xueji*, is not to gain fame or power but to change the people’s worldviews and conduct. Although the text is about the necessity of the ruler to use education to transform his people and culture, such a transformation, to be effective, requires individual effort from the people, i.e. self-cultivation. The desired outcome is moral transformation where the people internalise and demonstrate exemplary moral behaviours. Such a transformation is achieved not by employing an elite group of officials or by having a virtuous ruler (although these are important in themselves), but by providing education for the people.

What then is the *content* of learning that could transform the people and perfect their customs? Put otherwise, what are the sharable values and symbolic resources specific to self-cultivation? Section II of *Xueji* asserts that “people untutored cannot know the Tao”. The content of learning is ‘Tao’ or ‘dao’ (Way); the *process* of learning is knowing the Way. The Way essentially embodies the normative tradition passed down from antiquity that contributed to the formation of Confucian ideals (Chan 2000). The Way encompasses the sharable values such as *ren* (humanity or benevolence), *xiao* (filial piety) and *yi* (rightness or appropriateness) as well as symbolic resources such as the ancient classics and rituals (*li*) (for details of sharable values as taught by Confucius in the *Analects*, see Author). The classics are revered because Confucius and his followers such as Xunzi believe that the knowledge of the Way was preserved in them (Hutton, 2014). The rituals (*li*), as standards for proper behaviours that were passed down from the sages, direct human beings to live according to the Way (Hutton, 2014). It is significant that the Chinese word ‘know’ (*zhi*) in ‘know the Tao’ (*zhidao*) (passage II) is not limited to intellectual awareness. Noting that the Confucian understanding of knowledge is saturated with practical and axiological significance, Li (1999) avers that the “only Way for human beings to know, and hence to join the Way of Heaven, is to participate in the process of the self-creation of the Way” (pp. 59-60). It is noteworthy that learners are exalted in the *Xueji* to not just ‘know’ the Way but also to trust in it (passage IX). The action-orientation of knowledge explains why self-cultivation is so pivotal to Confucianism: each individual needs to conscientiously cultivate oneself so as to transform oneself and collectively realise the Way.

Regarding the *essence* of self-cultivation, a distinguishing feature is its balance between ‘self’ and ‘others’. Confucianism teaches the need for the learner to cultivate oneself while constantly relying on others at the same time. Successful self-cultivation, in other words, requires the self to be open to and rely on others. One’s relation with people in the

community is a mirror that reflects the stage of one's moral cultivation (Yao, 1996). Rather than diminishing the self when one situates oneself in a social context, the self is broadened and deepened in an ever-expanding circle of human relatedness (Tu, 1985). Self-cultivation, for Xunzi, involves two major components: being committed to learning the classics and improving oneself by observing ritual or normative behaviours (*li*). First, submitting oneself to study and practising learning, for Xunzi, entails the following: "concentrate their hearts and make single-minded their intentions, if they were to ponder, query, and thoroughly investigate – then if they add to this days upon days and connect to this long period of time, if they accumulate goodness without stopping" (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23, lines 278-281). The second component of self-cultivation is the observance of rituals (*li*). Maintaining that "ritual is that by which to correct your person" (*Xunzi*, Chapter 2, line 175), Xunzi asserts that a person whose disposition accords with ritual will become a sage. Conversely, "to contradict ritual is to be without a proper model"; such a person "will accomplish nothing but chaos and recklessness" (*Xunzi*, Chapter 2, lines 184, 188). By 'rituals', Xunzi has in mind not only ceremonial rites but all normative behaviours expected of learners at all times. Examples of rituals/normative behaviours mentioned in *Xunzi* are the correct ways of mourning, receiving constructive criticism and interacting with others. The *Xueji* adds that rituals/normative behaviours include how learners interact with their teachers and peers that demonstrate their ability to "esteem their fellow students" (*Xueji*, passage V) and "cherish their teachers" (passage V). Rituals facilitates self-cultivation by enabling the person to acquire, exhibit and internalise exemplary values, dispositions and conduct. In the process, the learner gradually transforms oneself and perfects one's customs, which is the purpose of self-cultivation as stated in passage I of *Xueji*. The theory-practice nexus in Confucianism explains why self-cultivation underscores not just the cognitive, but also the affective and behavioural development of learners in the *process* of learning. Rituals/ normative behaviours provide the means for self-realisation as individuals participate in their community (Tu, 1985).

So indispensable is self-cultivation that Xunzi argues that anyone can become a sage-like Yu as long he or she puts in sufficient effort in studying and living ethically according to rituals/normative behaviours. As he puts it, "if people on the streets were to use their material for understanding these things and the equipment for practising them to base themselves upon the knowable patterns and practicable aspects of *ren* [humanity] and *yi* [rightness], then it is clear that anyone on the streets could become a Yu" (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23, lines 272-276). The reason why Xunzi exalts self-cultivation is that he believes that human nature is evil. He cautions that "[t]hose who give rein to their nature and inborn dispositions, who take comfort in being utterly unrestrained, and who violate ritual and *yi* [rightness], become petty men. (*Xunzi*, Chapter 23, lines 38-40).

But self-cultivation through relying on one's own understanding and strength are insufficient for successful learning. Accompanying self-effort is close relationships with others, particularly one's teacher. Explaining why it is crucial to learn from one's teacher, Xunzi points out that one cannot comprehend the deep meanings of ancient classics such as the *Book of Odes*, *Book of Documents* and *Spring and Autumn Annals* without tutoring:

The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentlemen, then you will come to honour these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world. Thus, in learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person (Chapter 1, lines 161-167).

On the significance of building positive relationships with one's teachers and friends, the *Xueji* draws attention to "cherishing teachers" (passage V) and "being fond of teachers" (passage IX), as well as "esteeming fellow students" (passage V) and "taking pleasure in friends" (passage IX).

### **Implications of a Confucian Perspective of Self-cultivation in Learning for SDL**

When we compare SDL and the Confucian concept of self-cultivation, it can be observed that they converge on the learner taking ownership and responsibility for his or her own learning. In both cases, the learner's independence, autonomy and inner-directedness are underlined, to varying degrees, as the key ingredients for successful learning. However, the Confucian notion of self-cultivation, when compared with SDL, supports greater teacher-control. Rather than the learner assuming the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating those learning experiences, as in the case for SDL (Caffarella, 1993), the Confucian teacher is often the one who plans, implements and assesses the learner in self-cultivation. This difference may be attributed to the Confucian belief in the Way as embodying the normative tradition passed down from antiquity. An accent is placed on respecting and learning from one's teachers as they are perceived to be experts and exemplars of Way-knowers. The Confucian value of revering one's teachers as well as one's elders, according to Li (1999), reflects the logic of self-cultivation: "with the Confucian ideal of life, the more time one has lived, the more likely one is to be better cultivated" (p. 93).

However, the strong teacher-control in Confucian self-cultivation does not necessarily mean that learner-control has no place in such form of cultivation. Learner-control in Confucian culture exists along a continuum where greater control, independence and autonomy are given to the learner as he or she progresses in self-cultivation. This staged model of learning is mentioned in passage V of *Xueji* that refers to a nine-year programme to transform the learners and perfect their customs. The ideal person in the Confucian tradition is a *junzi*, translated by Wong as 'gentleman' but more accurately understood as an exemplary person who promotes and demonstrates learner-control. This is evident in passage XIII of *Xueji* where the teacher is described as a *junzi* who supports learner-control by utilising the enlightenment approach (Yang et al., 2012). In the same vein, Xunzi holds that the *junzi* displays learner-control when observing rituals. Rather than viewing the rituals as inviolable rules, "Xunzi allows that people with developed moral judgement may need to depart from the strict dictates of ritual on some occasions" (Hutton, 2014, p. xxvii).

The Confucian concept of self-cultivation is relevant to SDL, given their common emphasis on self-learning. There are two major implications for SDL arising from our study of a Confucian interpretation of self-cultivation in learning. The first is a suggestion for a model of SDL that capitalises on the *collective resources and wisdom* to promote individual and group learning. As discussed earlier, the Confucian concept of self is contrasted with and yet related to others (Yao, 1996). Tu (1985) alludes to this 'self-others' balance when he observes that self-cultivation involves being responsive to the sharable values of one's own community. Following the Confucian conception of the self as "an experiencing and reflecting person here and now" with existential commitment, self-cultivation is "independent, autonomous and inner-directed" (Tu, 1985, pp. 55, 57). The Confucian notion of the self is not a "given" in the sense of a definitive self or a ready-made soul; it is instead formed and evolved through a "person-making" process (Li, 1999, p. 92). Arguing along the same line, de Bary (1983) asserts that the Confucian self is never abstracted from society but always lives in a dynamic relation to others. Far from being not an atomic entity, the self is the 'focus of a network' (Li, 1999) or 'focus-field' (Hall & Ames, 1998) where the diverse social

contexts defined by human relations and sociopolitical orders “constitute the fields focused by individuals who are in turn shaped by the field of influences they focus” (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 40).

With reference to the two schools of thought for SDL discussed at the start of the paper (individual vs. collective), it is apparent that Confucian self-cultivation is aligned with the ‘collective’ school of thought. Confucianism, as noted earlier, situates the self and self-cultivation within a social context and human relatedness. Given the purpose of learning to transform the people and perfect their customs, there is a strong collective dimension to learning in the Confucian tradition. Furthermore, the Confucian concept of the Way as encompassing the sharable values and symbolic resources of one’s society means that self-cultivation is culture-specific and communal. Rooted in the Confucian concept of the self as constituted and situated within human relations, self-cultivation entails the dual cultivation of self and others. The learning approach propagated by self-cultivation is thus *both* ‘self-directed’ and ‘selves-directed’ where individual learning occurs concurrently with group learning.<sup>iv</sup>

It is interesting to note that some researchers have advocated a version of SDL that brings to the fore the ‘collective’. For example, Brookfield (1985) maintains that no act of learning can be self-directed in the sense of being devoid of reliance or assistance from external sources, whether human or material. He highlights the social component of learning where the learner is situated within “informal learning networks”:

My own research into successful independent learning among adults of low educational attainment in the United Kingdom (Brookfield, 1982) showed that the adults whom I surveyed had placed their learning efforts very deliberately *within a social context*. [...] [T]he learning activities of the adults whom I interviewed were placed consciously and deliberately within the context of *informal learning networks*. These networks and information exchanges provided evaluative indices for learning through peer comparison, and they established a setting within which the learners could act as skill models and resource consultants to fellow learners of varying levels of expertise (Brookfield, 1985, pp. 7-8, italics added; also see Brookfield, 1981, 1983).

Also privileging the collective is Garrison (1997) who constructs SDL from a collaborative constructive perspective. He avers that such a perspective “has the individual taking responsibility for constructing meaning while including the participation of others in confirming worthwhile knowledge”, thereby making the learning outcomes “personally meaningful and socially worthwhile” (p. 19). It is important to note that seeking external assistance is not incompatible with being a highly self-directed learners. Grow (1991) holds that “highly self-directed learners sometimes choose highly directive teachers” (p. 128). Abd-El-Fattah (2010)’s empirical research also shows that the quality of learning outcomes is not simply a question of learner-control and responsibility, but depends instead on the teacher playing an integral part in clarifying goals, shaping learning activities, and assessing learning outcomes. In other words, a learner’s social capital and group learning processes enable individuals to move from low to high self-directedness (O’Donnell ,1999, cited in Kerka, 1999).

The second implication for SDL is a proposal for a greater emphasis to be placed on a *shared moral vision of the good* for learning. To be sure, some researchers such as Entwistle (1981), Brookfield (1985), Candy (1991) and Garrison (1997) have highlighted the moral dimension of SDL. Candy (1991), for instance, describes a self-directed learner as possessing a strong sense of personal values and beliefs that empower one’s autonomy and determination. Garrison (1997) calls for the creation of conditions where “students become



increasingly motivated by authentic interest and desire to construct personal meaning and shared understanding (worthwhile knowledge)” (p. 29). Brookfield (1985) advocates the need for learners to see value frameworks as cultural constructs and understand their power to change the world. In his words, “In assisting adults to realise their adulthood by coming to appreciate their power to transform their personal and collective worlds lies the unique mission of the adult educator” (p. 10).

But it remains unclear what the above-mentioned researchers mean by ‘personal values’, ‘personal meaning’, ‘shared understanding’ and ‘value frameworks’. Given that personal and collective values are inevitably shaped by historical, philosophical, political, social and cultural conditions at a particular site, what is needed is a moral vision of the good that stems from and is shared by members of a community. Such a vision underpins, guides and propels SDL by motivating individual learners to go beyond personal and material interests to promote a larger good and purpose in life. This vision is illustrated in self-cultivation that transforms society by realising the Way. The Way, as explained earlier, embodies the normative tradition and encompasses the sharable values and symbolic resources of ancient Chinese. It is worthy of note that the Way is not pre-set and unchanging. Pointing out that “the Way is never a static category, signifying something external and objective” Tu (1985) describes it as “a process, a movement, and, indeed, a dynamic unfolding of the self as a vital force for personal, social, and cosmic transformation” (94). This means that the learners need to contribute towards the evolution and progress of the Way via self- and selves-cultivation. Given that different societies have their own normative traditions and cultural resources, members of the respective society have to co-construct their own shared moral vision of the good for SDL. This shared vision would then serve as a moral compass, individually and collectively, to change their own society through SDL.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a Confucian conception of self-cultivation in learning by referring to two Confucian texts and applying the discussion to SDL. This article extends the existing research on the conception of self-directed learning for adult learners. It is pointed out that a Confucian aim of self-cultivation is essentially seeking to morally transform the learners so that they can realise the Way (*dao*). The learning process involves a constant reliance on one’s teacher, a dedicated study of the classics and a personal commitment to improve oneself by observing normative behaviours (*li*). Applying the insights gained from our study of self-cultivated learning, the article further proposes two contemporary implications for SDL. What is suggested is a model of self-directed learning that is underpinned by a shared moral vision of the good and underscores the collective resources and wisdom to promote individual and group learning.

It is interesting to note that there are evidences of the Confucian perspectives of self-cultivation in learning in the modern society. Research on education in Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) societies shows that Chinese students practise self-cultivation in self-directed learning (An, 2004; Huang & Leung, 2004). Li (2004), in her empirical study on a Chinese cultural model of learning points, reports that Chinese students cultivate themselves in learning through hard work, dedication to learn systematically, and possessing the requisite moral values and learning virtues. Self-cultivation even extends to learning Chinese martial arts and Chinese calligraphy (Wong, 2004). The influence of Confucian principles is not confined to CHC countries. In the context of business, American management scholar Peter F. Drucker has alluded to the Confucian notion of self-cultivation where individuals in an

organisation, as self-directed learners, execute their parts correctly and apply the proper attitudes as part of establishing inter-dependent relationships (Romar, 2004). Calling for the relevance of self-cultivation for leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kim and Kim (2014) contend that the ultimate goal of self-cultivation is to become a moral leader who has the power to transform a society. Whether it is to attain moral perfection, sagehood or simply self-improvement, a Confucian perspective of self-cultivation demonstrates a concern for human refinement that is deeply embedded within the culture of traditional China.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> It should be added, as rightly noted by Caffarella (1993), that Knowles (1975, 1980) does not rule out a self-directed learner being “temporarily dependent” in the learning situation (p. 30).

<sup>ii</sup> I follow Wong (1976) in translating the *Xueji* as ‘Record of Learning’. Other scholars have translated it as ‘Record on the Subject of Education’ (Legge, 1885), ‘The Subject of Education’ (Yuan, 2007), and ‘On Teaching and Learning’ (Yang, McEwan, Di & Ames, 2012). Whichever translation one chooses, the agreement among scholars is that the text focuses on both learning and teaching. It is instructive that the ancient Chinese character for learning (*xue*) refers to both ‘learning’ (*xue*) and ‘teaching’ (*jiao*) (Yang, 2010).

<sup>iii</sup> This passage as well as all other passages of the *Xueji* cited in this article are translated by Wong (1976) who uses the male pronoun throughout. Given the historical and socio-cultural context during which the *Xueji* was written, the learners and teachers were almost certainly men. However, it should be noted that the original text of *Xueji* which was written in classical Chinese is gender-neutral. Therefore it is arguable that the *Xueji*, when applied to the contemporary world, should include both male and female learners and teachers.

<sup>iv</sup> O’ Donnell (1999) coins the term ‘selves-directed learning’ to emphasise the collective over the individual in learning (cited in Kerka, 1999, p. 3). In self-cultivation, however, the collective does not take precedence over the individual in learning, but occurs alongside with the individual. This interpretation follows logically from the Confucian concepts of the self and self-cultivation.