A Comparative Study of the Liberal Arts Tradition and Confucian Tradition in Education

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Declining of Liberal Education

- Liberal arts colleges were put in a defensive position starting in the last quarter of the 19th century because of the establishment of the German model of research university and the implementation of the Morrill Act which helped to expand higher education by establishing land-grant universities.
- The rapid expansion of opportunity to higher education during the post-WWII period ushers in the age of universal higher education while further pushing liberal education to a defensive position.
In contrast to the continued decline and bleak future of liberal arts education and liberal arts colleges in Europe and America, there has been a revival of the liberal arts model in Asian countries in recent years.
Main Argument 1

Countries with Confucian cultural heritage such as China have rich soil for the Western liberal arts education because the liberal arts tradition and Confucian tradition share fundamental similarities in their humanistic educational philosophy, and thus the recent revival of liberal arts model is not really a revival of the Western tradition, but a revival of the Confucian tradition in the form of a modern liberal arts college.
Main Argument 2

Humanistic educational approaches such as liberal arts education and Confucian tradition are needed more than ever in a constantly changing economy and increasingly globalized world because of the skills (e.g., analytical, critical and independent thinking, oral and written communication) and values (e.g., humility, open-mindedness, diversity, compassion) they aim to inculcate among each individual.
Common Goal: A Meaningful and fulfilling life

Liberal arts tradition

i. For free man

ii. Free from practical considerations

iii. Liberates individuals from restraints of conventions

iv. Liberates individuals from loneliness and anxiety through connecting with nature and mankind, and thus achieve meaning and happiness
Goal: A Meaningful and fulfilling life

Confucian tradition
Sets as a life goal the freedom from any kind of dependence or confusion and the purpose of learning is to ultimately align one’s heart with what is true and right.

The Master said: “At fifteen, I had mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right” (The Analects, 2.4).
The Ideal Person in Liberal Arts Tradition

- Is not as abstract or elusive as one assumes; it actually cultivates concrete skills and values in students.
- The skills sought after in liberal education include logical thinking and reasoning as well as communication—both orally and in written form.
- The values that liberal arts education aims to cultivate include open-mindedness, empathy (i.e., sensitivity of and respect for differences and diversity), and compassion.
The Ultimate Purpose of Learning is Not Knowledge or Skill Acquisition, but Moral Cultivation Which Can Help to Ground One in His/Her Family and Community.

Junzi, a Man of Virtues and Morality

Ren is Usually Translated as “Love,” “Benevolence,” “Humanheartedness,” or “Goodness,” and the Ultimate Goal of Self-Cultivation is to Achieve Ren.

Li is Usually Translated as “Ritual,” “Rite,” “Ceremony,” “Rules,” or “Propriety,” and It Refers to the Social Etiquette That Regulates Human Relations and Facilitates Communications.
In developing the curriculum for liberal education, Hirst seeks the kind of knowledge that is “logically basic” because it provides “a necessary foundation for later studies.”

In alignment with Hirst’s “logically basic” knowledge, the “Great Books” approach was envisioned by philosopher Mortimer Adler and implemented by Robert Hutchins.

Hutchins (1978) calls those classical works “permanent studies” which “draw out the elements of our common human nature, because they connect man with man, because they connect us with the best that man has thought, because they are basic to any further study and to any understanding of the world.”
Curriculum and Pedagogy in Liberal Arts Tradition

- Knowledge is organized into three categories: language, literature, and the arts; mathematics and science; and the social studies.

- Corresponding skills that are developed through those categories of knowledge include: language skills, mathematical and scientific skills, and the skills of analysis and critical judgment.
Curriculum and Pedagogy in Confucian Tradition

Similar to the “Great Books” approach, the Confucian tradition requires reading of a canon of Confucian texts.

It was during the Han Dynasty (206BCE-220CE) when the Five Classics started to be used for selecting officials, and they included the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing*), the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing*), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*), which “were considered authoritative statements of philosophy, history, poetry, and ritual”
The Four Books were added in Song Dynasty (960-1279), and included the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), the *Mencius* (*Mengzi*), and the *Mean* (*Zhongyong*).

The importance of Confucian classical works was reinforced when the first national civil service examination system, which was based on a canon of Confucian texts, was established in 606.
Contrary to the common stereotype that traditional Chinese way of teaching and learning, which is characterized by rote learning and heavily relies on Confucian classics, does not foster independent and critical thinking, the Chinese pedagogic tradition helps to cultivate those skills and develop students’ motivation to learn.
Institutionalization of the Liberal Arts Tradition

- Liberal arts colleges have the following common characteristics: “a relatively intimate family-like campus culture, full-time residential students, faculty who are committed to working collaboratively with their students both inside and outside the classroom, and a strong emphasis on fostering students involvement in both academic and social activities” (Pascare et al. 2005, p. viii).
Institutionalization of the Confucian Tradition

- *Shuyuan*, or the Academy, is an institution of higher learning in imperial China which emerged in the Tang Dynasty (618-906), reached maturity in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), and was abolished in the Qing Dynasty (around 1900).
Commonalities between Liberal Arts Colleges and *shuyuan*

- Their common goal is to develop the whole person and cultivate an ideal person, a well-informed individual who understands himself and the society, and who connects his life goal and life course with others.

- They are both of relatively small size in the context of their respective historical period of time.

- They are both of residential institution, which, along with small size and low student-faculty ratio, contribute to a personalized campus climate and learning community.
In defense of humanistic and holistic approaches to education

Even though shuyuan was abolished over one hundred years ago, the humanistic approach of Confucian tradition has been passed on from generation to generation. The recent revival of interest in Confucian philosophy and classics in China both at institutions and among the public is a reflection of the perseverance of cultural tradition, and the mushrooming of liberal arts colleges in East Asian countries in recent years is testament to an urgent need for such humanistic approach to education.
In defense of humanistic and holistic approaches to education

- liberal arts colleges yielded higher scores on intellectual and personal development measures
- alumni of liberal arts colleges were more satisfied with their undergraduate education which had more impact on their “learning and intellectual development, development leadership and self-efficacy skills, personal and spiritual development, and development of responsible citizenship.”
In defense of humanistic and holistic approaches to education

- The general skills of reading, writing, thinking and analysis that liberal education cultivates in individual student make it flexible and practical in a constantly changing economy which can “render specific training obsolete.”
In the Name of Cultivating Humanity

On an individual level the value of a humanistic approach lies in the opportunity it provides for students to pursue knowledge, explore ideas and cultivate self-development. Further, it helps to connect each individual with other individuals, the society with nature, thus providing a purpose and meaning to their lives and making them a happy person who lives a fuller life. On the societal level, a humanistic approach can provide a common binding and cohesiveness, thus strengthening a society. On the level of mankind, such an approach can bring out the “common elements” (Hutchins 1978) and “cultivate humanity” (Nussbaum 1997), and continuously preserve human culture.