



Student formation in higher education: a comparison and combination of Confucian *xiushen* (self-cultivation) and *Bildung*

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Abstract

Higher education has long established primary importance to the formation of students, manifest in ideas such as Confucian *xiushen* (self-cultivation) and *Bildung*. However, despite the shared focus on the idea of humans becoming humans, *xiushen* and *Bildung* are built on divergent philosophical traditions. The divergence has led to varied practice in individual formation. This paper conceptually explores, compares, and searches for potential combination of the ideas of *xiushen* and *Bildung* in higher education. As such, it provides new insights into student formation in higher education. Specifically, it is argued that the best situation for individual formation is when individual agency is harmonised with the external environment. This points to two essential considerations for student formation in higher education: students' agency and the necessary support from society and higher education institutions.

Keywords Student formation · Confucian *xiushen* (self-cultivation) · *Bildung* · Comparison · Complementarity

Introduction

This paper conceptually explores, compares, and searches for potential combination of the ideas of Confucian *xiushen* (self-cultivation) and *Bildung* in higher education, including the philosophical ideas underpinning them. By doing so, it aims to provide new insights into student formation in higher education.

Higher education has long established primary importance to the formation of students, manifest in ideas such as Confucian *xiushen* (self-cultivation) and *Bildung*. For example, Marginson (2018, p.1) proposes the statement of 'higher education as self-formation' through partly drawing on the German *Bildung* tradition and the Confucian *xiushen* tradition. Nevertheless, despite the shared

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focus on the idea of humans becoming humans, *xiushen* and *Bildung* are not the same. They are built on divergent philosophical traditions. As will be demonstrated in this paper, the divergence of philosophical traditions have not only led to varied approaches to individual formation, but have revealed distinctive, and in certain respects mutually complementary, limitations of using either of *xiushen* and *Bildung* to guide student formation in higher education.

It should be noted that the investigation of *Bildung* not only considers the German idea of *Bildung* but relevant Anglophone ideas, including John Dewey's idea of growth and Amartya Sen's idea of capability. Although originated from Germany, *Bildung* has become a key concept in relation to student formation in Anglophone societies. As Løvlie et al. (2003, p. viii) assert 'there is no doubt that the idea of *Bildung* has been of crucial importance to the development of education, most obviously in Germany and parts of northern Europe but also indirectly throughout the Western world'. The two considered Anglophone ideas were arguably developed drawing on the idea of *Bildung*, either directly or indirectly; and the idea of *Bildung* further gained global relevance partly because of the influence of these relevant Anglophone ideas.

Comparison and combination It is expected that by comparison, this paper reveals similarities and differences of individual formation between *xiushen* and *Bildung*; and by combination, it identifies novel approaches to student formation in higher education. Such comparison and combination can also contribute to mutual understanding between different higher education systems concerning their varied approaches to student formation. As the paper will show, the notion of an individual's agency is key to developing the combination. It is thus necessary to clarify the notion here. An individual's agency is understood as a combination of Amartya Sen's idea of agency freedom, which echoes the free will in *xiushen* (see below), and *xiushen*'s focus on personal efforts and determination. In other words, the individual agency contains two components: an individual's personal efforts and determination and the free will or agency freedom. According to Sen (1985, p. 204), 'agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve'. An important aspect of an individual's agency freedom is the ability to reason.

The search for potential combination is based on my epistemological position manifested in Chinese Yin-Yang philosophy. As the a fundamental way to know the nature of reality in the Chinese tradition (Wang, 2012), Yin-Yang philosophy states that the universe can be understood as made up of *yin* (e.g. moon, earth, and negative) and *yang* (e.g. sun, heaven, and positive) that are two halves of the whole. *Yin* and *yang* are in contradiction, but at the same time mutually complementary and dependent (Allison, 1998). The contradiction and complementarity suggest that it is possible to complete contrasting concepts/ideas with each other. Such complementarity points to a possible way for combination of two different and even contrasting concepts/ideas. In this paper, the epistemological position enables the combination of diverging ideas from *xiushen* and *Bildung* into new ideas with regard to student formation in higher education.

The idea of Confucian *xiushen*

The Confucian anthropocosmic worldview and *xiushen*

The idea of *xiushen* reflects the Chinese understanding of 'the way of being human in traditional China' (Tu, 1979, p. 238). Confucian *xiushen* is developed in terms of the Confucian anthropocosmic worldview (Lu & Jover, 2018, p. 428; Tu, 2013, p. 335), with

its expanding entities of the individual, family, society, state, and *tianxia* (all under heaven) (see Figure 1). The anthropocosmic worldview differs from the dualist worldview in the German idealist tradition, the origin of the *Bildung* idea, in which I is opposed to non-I/other (see below) (Kivelä, 2012, p. 60). It views the world as a harmonised whole and strives for the Great Harmony (*datong*).

When the Way prevails, all under heaven is for and belongs to all, in which the selection criteria are wisdom and ability. Mutual confidence is promoted and good neighbourliness is cultivated. Men do not regard as parents only their own parents, nor do they treat as children only their own children... They despise indolence, yet they do not use their energies for their own interests. In this way selfish scheming are repressed... This is called the Great Harmony (*datong*).¹

The realisation of the Great Harmony requires every individual's persistent effort in *xiushen* that includes inward and outward perfectionism (Tu, 1985). The effort to stay true to human beings' natural dispositions is the first and fundamental step of inward perfectionism, the aim of which is the achievement of internal sagehood (*neisheng*). The sage not only grasps their natural dispositions but cooperates with and follows them (see, for example, Chapter II of Tu, 1985). The process of following and cooperation involves the sage's engagement with the collective spheres, seeking the harmonisation of the external world — this is the process of outward perfectionism (Mou, 1999, p. 4). The aim of outward perfectionism is to achieve external kingliness (*waiwang*). The *Book of Rites* describes the process of *xiushen* as:

Men in old times when they wanted to further the cause of enlightenment and civilisation in the world began first by securing good government in their country. When they wanted to secure good government in their country, they began first by putting their family in order. When they wanted to put their family in order, they began first by ordering their conversation aright. When they wanted to put their conversation aright, they began first by putting their minds in a proper and well-ordered condition. When they wanted to put their minds in a proper and well-ordered condition, they began first by getting true ideas. When they wanted to have true ideas, they began first by acquiring knowledge and understanding. The acquirement of knowledge and understanding comes from a systematic study of things.²

Internal sagehood and external kingliness are the realisation of a morally virtuous inside together with actively spreading Kingcraft outside. Outward and inward perfectionism together lead to 'the ultimate self-transformation of the person as the key to the realization of social and political values' (Tu, 1985, p. 12). I shall now examine approaches to inward and outward perfectionism in *xiushen*.

¹ Translated by the author. The original Chinese text: '大道之行也，天下为公。选贤与能，讲信修睦；故人不独亲其亲，不独子其子... 恶其不出於身也，不必为己... 谓大同。' — *Liyun, Book of Rites*.

² Translated by Hongming Gu. See Gu, H. (trans.) (2017). *Higher Education and the Universal Order of Conduct of Life*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

The original Chinese text: '古之欲明明德于天下者，先治其国；欲治其国者，先齐其家；欲齐其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先诚其意；欲诚其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。格物而后知至，知至而后意诚，意诚而后心正，心正而后身修，身修而后家齐，家齐而后国治，国治而后天下平。' — *Higher Education, Book of Rites*.

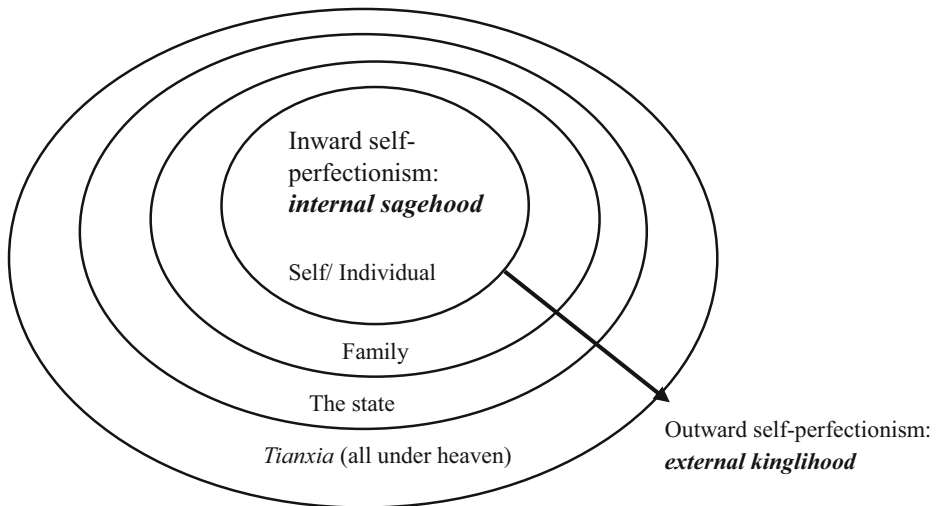


Fig. 1 The expanding entities and *xiushen*

Staying true to oneself and the cultivation of moral qualities

Staying true to human beings' own natural dispositions and moral perfectionism, primarily referring to the cultivation of moral qualities, are two essential components of *xiushen*. The apparent paradox between the two components is justified by the argument that human beings are naturally virtuous. To quote Mencius's teachings,

All people have a heart that cannot stand to see the suffering of others... The sense of concern for others (or sympathy) is the starting point of Humaneness. The feeling of shame and disgust is the starting point of rightness. The sense of humility and deference is the starting point of Propriety and the sense of right and wrong is the starting point of wisdom.³

The idea that human beings share the same natural dispositions leads to the further assertion that all human beings have the same potential to realise the Confucian ideal. In other words, every human being is equal in natural morality and capacity to self-cultivate. This equality in morality and capacity is now often referred to as the sameness of personhood by scholars (de Bary, 1983, p. 20; Chan, 2002, p. 298). However, despite the assumption of the same personhood and the same process of *xiushen*, the results of *xiushen* are de facto different in outcome. In the eyes of the Confucian literati, such differences are derived from individuals' differing agency in the sense of *xiushen*, namely, their varying personalities including their levels of perseverance, diligence, and resilience (see also below).

Staying true to oneself Many would argue that Confucian *xiushen*, which stipulates a template for human formation, confines the individual's free and diverse development (see, for example, Hahm, 2006). Nevertheless, the development of individual's moral autonomy in *xiushen*, and in particular the cultivation of the free will, is not limited by such confinement. *Xiushen* centres on providing room for an individual to develop free will and expand moral autonomy, which is an

³ Translated by the author. The original Chinese text: '人皆有不忍人之心，...，惻隱之心、仁之端也。羞惡之心、義之端也。辭讓之心、禮之端也。是非之心、智之端也。' — *Gongsun Chou (Part I)*, Mencius.

endless inward process of expanding one's moral autonomy to reach the status of authentic *zide*, meaning staying true to oneself (Kim, 2008, p. 394; de Bary, 1983, p. 22). As Confucius states,

At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I was never in two minds; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned for the reception of truth; at seventy I stay true to myself without overstepping the line.⁴

According to Confucianism, inward perfectionism requires higher learning, especially the learning of the Confucian classics. The intention of learning the classics is not to blindly follow the teachings, but to voluntarily and actively make critical reflections on, and re-interpretations of, the teachings. Re-interpretation is a process of repossessing the way (de Bary, 1983, p. 19; Tu, 1994, p. 1138). Then *zide* (staying true to oneself) is achieved. The person's mind is attuned to the way. In this manner people exercise free will. In addition, according to Confucianism, every person has the same potential and capacity to self-cultivate, and the outcome of *xiushen* entirely relies on human beings' own efforts. *Xiushen* is a highly individualised process, independent from external resources and environment. It is a personal journey.

However, many scholars/researchers have criticised Confucianism's setting aside of the environment and making it irrelevant to the individual's *xiushen* (Chan, 2013, p. 79). Arguably, echoing Rawls's (1971/2005, p. 100) idea of 'callous meritocratic society', deliberate neglect of the influence of the external environment conceals the fact that social inequity does make a difference in *xiushen*.

The cultivation of moral qualities Despite neglecting the external environment, an essential feature of perfectionism is the interaction between the individual and social embeddedness. Here *xiushen* stresses the cultivation of morality and virtue, embodied in human relationships. A typical example is the 'five constant virtues (*wuchang*)' in Confucianism — benevolence and humanity (*ren*), righteousness and rite (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and integrity (*xin*). All of the five virtues centre on human relationships.

Confucian literati assume that when all individuals behave according to the five constant virtues, human relationships are in harmony and the social order spontaneously emerges. To harmonise social relationships, individuals start with proper interaction with their family and then gradually extend to the larger collective spheres. As demonstrated in the above quotation from the *Book of Rites* and illustrated in Figure 1, outward perfectionism describes individuals' cooperation with and following of the way. Emphasis on the Great Harmony and dealing with the social context so as to establish harmonious social relationships is a primary mission for *xiushen*.

The interaction between individual and community throughout *xiushen*

According to Tu (2013, p. 335), outward perfectionism, based on inward perfectionism, is a process of harmonising and balancing the relationship between the self and the successively expanding collective spheres, through the individual's engagement with community and being responsive to the values, rituals, and customs shared by the community.

Inward perfectionism seems to suggest that Confucian *xiushen* is an independent and individualistic process, without requirements in relation to the external environment (I shall demonstrate later that in *Bildung* there are at least two prerequisites related to the

⁴ Translated by the author. The original Chinese text: '子曰:吾十有五而志于学,三十而立,四十而不惑,五十而知天命,六十而耳顺,七十而从心所欲,不逾矩。' — Weizheng, *Analects*.

environment). Nevertheless, outward perfectionism does stress the importance of the interaction between the self and other. The self is situated within the social context. On the one hand, outward perfectionism involves social participation and requires individuals to transcend their personal development and interests to promote the creation of the public good and sacrifice the private good if necessary. For example, as noted, outward perfectionism embraces at least three steps on the basis of inward perfectionism: managing family affairs (*qijia*), followed by governing the state (*zhiguo*), and the final step of moving to bring peace and sound governance to all under heaven (*pingtianxia*).

It is important to recognise here that the social context ‘is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic interaction involving a rich and ever-changing texture of human-relatedness woven by the constant participation of other significant dyadic relationships’ (Bellah, 1976, p. 118). Even though individuals ought to follow social customs and mores, social customs and mores are constantly changed and updated by individuals. The harmonisation of all under heaven is de facto inviting individual’s ongoing engagement with, and alteration of, the external environment and human relations.

On the other hand, in addition to its role in outward perfectionism, human relatedness also contributes to individual’s inward perfectionism. For example, the internalisation of Confucian teachings, as the approach to inward perfectionism, requires guidance from teachers. The neo-Confucian master Cheng Yi states, ‘who learns must look for teacher’s help, with cautiousness and rigour’⁵.

Therefore, despite Confucian literati’s efforts to theorise *xiushen* in an individualised way (making *xiushen* entirely relying on individual effort, independent from the environment), *xiushen* is embedded in actual social settings and relies on the external environment, particularly social and academic environment. As demonstrated by the idea of *Bildung* (see below) and numerous empirical studies (see, for example, Boudon, 1974; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Liu, 2016; Luo et al., 2018), the external environment plays an essential role in the individual’s formation. Thus, the deliberate individualisation of *xiushen* by Confucian literati may need to be taken with caution when applying *xiushen* to student formation in contemporary higher education.

The idea of *Bildung*

The German idea of *Bildung*

Schwenk (1996) points out two historical traditions of the modern concept of *Bildung*: the *cultura animi* (spiritual cultivation/refining of the soul) idea from antique Hellenism and the Christian doctrine of *Imago Dei* (God’s image) (Siljander & Sutinen, 2012, p. 3). Since the Enlightenment *Bildung* became associated with the expansion of individual’s rational autonomy through the cultivation of reasoning (Kivelä, 2012). According to Siljander and Sutinen (2012, pp. 3, 4), regardless of different interpretations, *Bildung* comprises at least two meanings: (1) ‘a creative process in which a person, through his or her own actions, shapes and “develops” himself or herself’; and (2) ‘a person’s “improvement”’.

⁵ Translated by the author. The original Chinese text: ‘学者必求师, 从师不可不谨也。’

The dualistic worldview Underpinning the concept of *Bildung* is a dualistic worldview (Wills, 2017, p. 317), which epistemologically understands the world through an opposed duality: I and non-I (von Humboldt, 2000). According to German thinkers, including Kant, Fichte, and von Humboldt, it is through the interplay between I and the other that ‘I’ further develops and perfects him/herself (Kivelä, 2012; Wills, 2017). The ultimate aim is for I to become a rational autonomous individual in social settings. The duality of I and non-I reflects a long-lasting tension, that between individual and community. Arguably, there are at least two kinds of alienation embodying this tension: firstly, there is ‘alienation from the present self, the letting go of immediate desires and egotistic interests in order to allow for an immersion into the world’; and secondly there is ‘alienation from the world in order to return home to the self’ (Schumann, 2019, p. 491).

A distinctive example of the tension is the contradiction between the freedom of I and limitations on I (Breazeale, 1994). In this case, an important aim of *Bildung* is to expand the freedom of I while harmonising the relationship between I and non-I, through their interplay. According to Fichte, the interplay between I and other/non-I is a process of perfection whereby individuals become rational autonomous beings, achieving the harmony between I and non-I. Fichte states,

Human being’s highest drive is the drive toward identity, toward complete harmony with itself, and – as a means for staying constantly in harmony with itself – toward the harmony of all external things with his own necessary concepts of them. ... All of these concepts found within the I should have an expression or counterpart in the not-I. This is specific character of man’s drive. (Fichte, 1966a, p. 35; cited from Kivelä, 2012, p. 70)

To empower the individual’s process of self-perfection throughout his/her interplay with the other, in *Bildung* there are certain requirements of the non-I, in the form of the external environment. Von Humboldt mentions two prerequisites of the environment:

The true purpose of [the human] – not that which changing inclinations prescribe but that which the eternally unchanging reason enjoins – is the highest and most harmonious *Bildung* of his powers to a whole. Freedom is the first and essential condition for this *Bildung*. Besides freedom the development of human powers requires one other thing, which is closely associated with freedom, a great manifoldness of situations. Even a free and highly independent person, when restricted to monotonous situations, cannot develop fully. (cited from Konrad, 2012, p. 110)

Von Humboldt’s idea that it is necessary for individuals to embed in the environment in order to fully develop also resonates with Dewey’s emphasis on ‘experience’ in the process of educational formation, including diversity of experiences, which has become a role of formation education to provide such opportunities for learning through experiences (see below). Arguably, in the *Bildung* tradition, negative freedom is a requirement of an individual’s personal development including the expansion of positive freedom.

***Bildung* as socially nested self-formation** *Bildung* is an intellectual as well as moral endeavour (Taylor, 2017). According to Taylor (2017), *Bildung* concerns an individual’s holistic development, and how such development may contribute to the achievement of a vision of better society.

On the one hand, *Bildung* is an intellectual endeavour to develop the individual’s reasoning ability. According to Kant (1784/1963), the aim is to release people from self-incurred

tutelage. Freedom is realised, through the development and exercise of one's own reasoning, in the process of *Bildung*. In Kant's words,

This enlightenment requires nothing but freedom – and the most innocent of all that may be called 'freedom': freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters. ... the public use of one's reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment to [human beings]. (Kant, 1784/1963, pp. 2, 3)

On the other hand, *Bildung* is a moral endeavour. It happens in social settings and expects individual development to be conducive to social cohesion. In Kant's views, ideally, the individual's development of reasoning, especially public reasoning, leads to social harmony. Here public reasoning highlights the contextualisation of reasoning in social and historical settings. There is a strong social dimension to public reasoning. It signifies the individual's social responsibility to independently employ his or her reasoning in relation to 'public' issues, and critically express opinions (Kivelä, 2012, p. 65). In this way, the public use of reasoning contributes to the betterment of society, as long as individuals have the freedom of, and possess the capacity to exercise that public reasoning. The cultivation of (public) reasoning requires education. The exercise of public reasoning also requires the cultivation of the individual's public spiritedness. I shall return to this in the next sub-section. Further, the achievement of harmony between I and non-I largely relies on the individual's public reasoning and public spiritedness, based on the individual's mutual bonds (Fichte, 1966b, p. 31; Kivelä, 2012, pp. 72, 73).

Dewey's idea of growth/education

Dewey's idea of growth as education centres on the individual's personal growth, and resonates deeply with the German idea of *Bildung*. For example, Retter (2012, p. 287) claims that 'in essence, Dewey's most important contribution, *Democracy and Education*, is basically a theory of *Bildung* – particularly in those areas where he writes about the role of interests, self-discipline and a curriculum of "humanistic and naturalist studies"'. In addition to these aspects, the paper finds that the influence of *Bildung* on Dewey's idea of growth is also reflected in the shared emphasis on the importance of environment and the interaction between the individual and environment. However, it should be noted that Dewey challenges the dualistic worldview of *Bildung* and imagines a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment (see below).

According to Dewey (1916/2011, p. 6), individuals develop and grow through the interplay between themselves and community, partly echoing *Bildung's* idea of the interplay between I and non-I. Nevertheless, the relationship between individual and community in Dewey's sense is less contradictory than that imagined between I and non-I. In other words, the dualism, underlying the German idea of *Bildung*, does not persist in Dewey's theses. As pointed out by Hall and Ames (1999), Dewey rejects the libertarian atomic individualism, but calls for creating community consisted of interdependent free responsible individuals as well as serviceable institutions through public education. They further argue that such vision actually reflects China's influence on Dewey (Hall & Ames, 1999, 165 ff.). Specifically, Dewey argues that freedom is not a condition of 'independence of social ties' nor can there be unlimited freedom regardless of communities (Dewey, 1927/2016, p. 180). Rather, freedom is 'the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association', as well as securing 'release and fulfilment of personal

potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others' (Dewey, 1927/2016, p. 180). This reflects Dewey's assumption of a reciprocal relationship between individual and community. Freedom to cultivate and manifoldness, as an environmental prerequisite of individual development, is again emphasised.

Education offers a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical, significance of philosophic discussions. ... The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice. If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education. (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 178)

In Dewey's conceptualisation, education is essential to individual growth. It is more than a matter of conveying knowledge or training skills. It is a process of individual formation. Through education, individuals become members of democratic society, echoing the socially nested *Bildung* and the outward self-perfectionism of *xiushen*. Dewey argues that individuals do not spontaneously become members of a community (Dewey, 1927/2016, p. 178). The public spiritedness of individuals is key. Only through education can people acquire public spiritedness, become mentally mature, be able to conduct philosophical discussions and further create, comprehend, and accept (or reject) values, beliefs, and methods. This is also fundamental to democracy (Dewey, 1927/2016, p. 178).

When a consensus is achieved, it needs to be passed from older to incoming generations. This is essential to the continuance of society. The growth of human beings is not merely physical growing up, but should involve the passage of 'habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger' (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 6). 'Education, and education alone, spans the gap' between generations (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 6). It is therefore evident that education should involve more than the mere acquisition of competencies and skills but, more importantly, entails the cultivation of human personality. For Dewey, education itself is an end. There is no one template for educating individuals. Nor are there stepladders or milestones. The content and way of education is determined by the attributes of the individual student. The argument is distinct from *xiushen*, which prescribes certain milestones in reaching the status of *neisheng waiwang*.

Dewey sees the environment as playing an essential role in an individual's growth through education, which is in contrast to *xiushen* as a highly individualised process. 'The formation of mind is wholly a matter of the presentation of the proper educational materials' (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 41). Dewey asserts that 'if the environment, in school and out, supplies conditions which utilize adequately the present capacities of the immature, the future which grows out of the present is surely taken care of' (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 34). This suggests the social aspect of growth, partly manifested in informal education. Dewey sees informal education as taking place in the individual's connection with communal settings, including families, friends, and communities, throughout the period of individual growth. In the contemporary world, informal education also takes place on the platform of social media.

Dewey acknowledges that the environment can impose 'dictations' on individuals and influence the process of education. He warns that education may become a coercive approach to controlling younger individuals. 'Social control of individuals rests upon the instinctive tendency of individuals to imitate or copy the actions of others' (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 22). Common understandings, unless being available for continual evolution and renewal, may turn

into the traditional repression of individuals. As Dewey (1916/2011, p. 250) states, ‘this common understanding of the means and ends of action is the essence of social control’. When social and political powers realise how repression can help to sustain themselves, they may utilise education as an accomplice of social and political control. It is necessary to find ways to overcome this possibility. Dewey’s solution is to develop people’s individuality and mentality, so that they can make their own judgments, based on experience. When that happens, those individuals become rational, autonomous, and desirable members of society. They are not only able to contribute to democracy, but also able to protect themselves from social and political repression. Such individuals possess both negative freedom and positive freedom.

Accordingly, education needs to be organised in a way to support each student’s growth in accordance with his/her own personality. The teacher needs to adjust pedagogy and content as required. Such a process of adjustment is scarcely feasible when teachers face many students, and is possible only in small-scale elite schools, where the families of students mostly have abundant social, economic, and cultural capital. Social inequality makes a difference. This difference is more salient in informal education, which almost entirely depends on family and local community.

Sen’s concept of capability

Arguably compared to Dewey’s idea of growth, Sen’s concept of capability seems to be less directly connected with the idea of *Bildung*. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated below, the capability approach resonates with *Bildung*’s foci on the expansion of individual’s ability of reasoning and the importance of environment in the individual development.

According to Sen (1999), the development of the individual is a process of the expansion of freedom — the enhancement of capability. Capability embraces two elements: having alternative choices and being able to make and exercise choices, reflecting both negative and positive freedom (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Being free from external interference, as negative freedom would suggest, is not enough. Having the capability to know what one wants, and work for those objectives, is the key. This requires the development of an individual’s agency freedom through cultivating the ability of reasoning. Notably, the two aspects of capability resonate with the environmental prerequisites of *Bildung* — negative freedom and manifoldness of the environment.

Sen underscores the importance of the environment in individual development. He argues that individual freedom, to a large extent, relies on social arrangements. As Sen notes, ‘individual freedom is quintessentially a social product’ (Sen, 1999, p. 31). In addition to *Bildung*’s two prerequisites of the environment, the capability concept includes one further prerequisite: being able to support the individual’s development. Sen moves a step forward from *Bildung*’s prevention of environment-generated limitations of the individual’s formation, negative freedom, to make the environment supportive of the individual’s formation, thus highlighting positive freedom. This suggests provision that develops an individual’s agency freedom. Sen (1999, p. 144) suggests a number of means whereby the capacity of people to reason and make choices is augmented, including good health care, opportunities for public debate, and education. He provides a simple but illuminating example. If the same opportunity is provided to two people, one of whom is well-educated while the other is not, there is a much higher possibility that the well-educated person will know how to turn the opportunity of what she/he wants, than is the case with her/his fellow citizen.

Comparison between *xiushen* and *Bildung*

Differences between *xiushen* and *Bildung*

The anthropocosmic worldview *vis-à-vis* the dualistic worldview and the aim to maintain a harmonious world *vis-à-vis* the aim to protect individual liberty while mitigating the tension between I and non-I The difference between the worldviews is fundamental to the comparison of *xiushen* and *Bildung*. Based on the Confucian anthropocosmic worldview, *xiushen*, as a process of individual self-perfectionism, aims to ensure that individuals genuinely work for the maintenance of the harmonious world. In contrast, the liberal Anglo-American tradition to a certain extent follows the dualistic worldview that views the world as composed of I and non-I/the other. Arguably, in spite of Dewey's efforts in reconciling the contradictory relationship between the individual and the environment and imagining a reciprocal relationship instead, the idea that there exist tensions between the individual and the environment persists in Anglo-American societies in general (Marginson & Yang, 2021). While *Bildung* attempts to mitigate the tension between I and non-I, its priority is to protect and enhance individual liberty. Here individual liberty embraces both negative freedom that protects individuals from external intrusion and the cultivation of an individual's agency freedom as positive freedom.

The sameness of personhood *vis-à-vis* diverse individuality *Xiushen* and *Bildung* disagree on the natural personality and capacity of human beings. While the idea of *xiushen* asserts that human beings are born with the same personhood (covering the natural personality, capacity, and potential), the idea of *Bildung* believes in the diversity of essential individual attributes. With this difference, *xiushen* and *Bildung* have developed varying approaches to individual development, especially concerning the role of environmental support (see below).

Inward and outward self-perfectionism *vis-à-vis* socially nested self-formation Drawing on the varying worldviews and assumptions of human beings' natural capacity and potential, the two ideas further diverge in terms of the process of individual development.

There are two broad stages of *xiushen*: inward and outward self-perfectionism. It is expected that, through higher learning, individuals gradually develop and exercise their capacity for critical reflection and thinking. Thus the free will is cultivated and manifested in an individual's ability to stay attuned to the way and stay true to him/herself. In Confucianism, this inward self-perfectionism is viewed as a purely individualistic process. Outward self-perfectionism concentrates on the individual's interaction with collective spheres such as family, local community, and the state. This process emphasises the cultivation of moral qualities, with which individuals become morally virtuous. The key moral qualities to be cultivated are the individual's responsibilities in contributing to the good of collective spheres and maintaining a harmonious world. Notably, although outward self-perfectionism involves interaction between the individual and collective spheres, the main method of perfection proposed by Confucianism is again highly individualistic, in the sense that the method deliberately neglects the external environment's role in individual development.

In contrast, *Bildung* is understood as a process of socially nested self-formation. The environment is pivotal to *Bildung*. There are at least two environmental prerequisites for *Bildung*: freedom of development and the manifoldness of situation. The two prerequisites are associated with the assumption of the diversity of natural individuality. As human beings are

born with diverse natural individuality, *Bildung* should not follow a certain template, but be rendered consistent with the individual's individuality. To employ this idea in the context of education, Dewey argues that teachers need to adjust their pedagogy and teaching content according to each student's individuality. Freedom, mainly in the form of negative freedom here, enables such free development. The manifoldness of situation provides individuals with different options and thus helps to prevent a monotonous situation. Based on these two prerequisites, Sen further argues that the environment should also attempt to actively support an individual's development. In other words, environmental supports, including education, are necessary to *Bildung*. Individuals are not isolated from the community — individual growth takes place in the community. When the two environmental prerequisites are in place, the relationship between individual and community can be reciprocal.

Nevertheless, while *Bildung* draws attention to the environment, it focuses less than might be expected on the personal efforts and determination of the individual in the process of development, which are essential elements of *xiushen*'s understanding of an individual's agency. When *Bildung* emphasises the development of agency freedom, this mostly refers to reasoning, not qualities such as diligence and determination.

Similarities: the free will/agency freedom, and moral qualities/public spiritedness

Xiushen and *Bildung* start with different worldviews and assumptions about natural individuality and disagree on the process of individual development. However, they have reached a consensus on two aims of individual formation.

The first is the development of the free will in *xiushen* and agency freedom in *Bildung*. As discussed, *xiushen* aims to enable the individual's development of the free will through inward self-perfectionism. The keystone of this development is to ensure individuals are attuned to the way through constant repossession of the way. This is a process of training the free will, especially the ability to critically reflect and think. Individuals thereby become able to stay true to themselves. For *Bildung*, the development of agency freedom centres on the training of the ability to reason. Freedom to make choice builds on an individual's agency freedom, manifested in the ability to truly understand the available options, and further requires negative freedom within which to make choices. Although freedom to make choices is not embraced by Confucianism (see, for example, Chan, 2002), the liberal emphasis on the development of agency freedom substantively overlaps with the Confucian emphasis on the development of free will.

Xiushen and *Bildung* also agree on the 'public' aspect of individual development: the cultivation of moral qualities in *xiushen* and the cultivation of public spiritedness in *Bildung*. The moral qualities particularly stressed by *xiushen* include the individual's responsibility to contribute to the good of the collective spheres and to maintain a harmonious world. The public spiritedness in *Bildung* is key to the mitigation of the tension between individual and community. Arguably, despite varying attitudes towards individual liberty, both of the moral quality and public spiritedness emphasise the individual's engagement with community and aim to make individual development conducive to community-building. Both expect to achieve a harmonious and well-ordered society consisting of members with these desirable qualities. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the above comparison (note that Figure 2 also shows the complementarity between *xiushen* and *Bildung* that will be discussed in the next section).

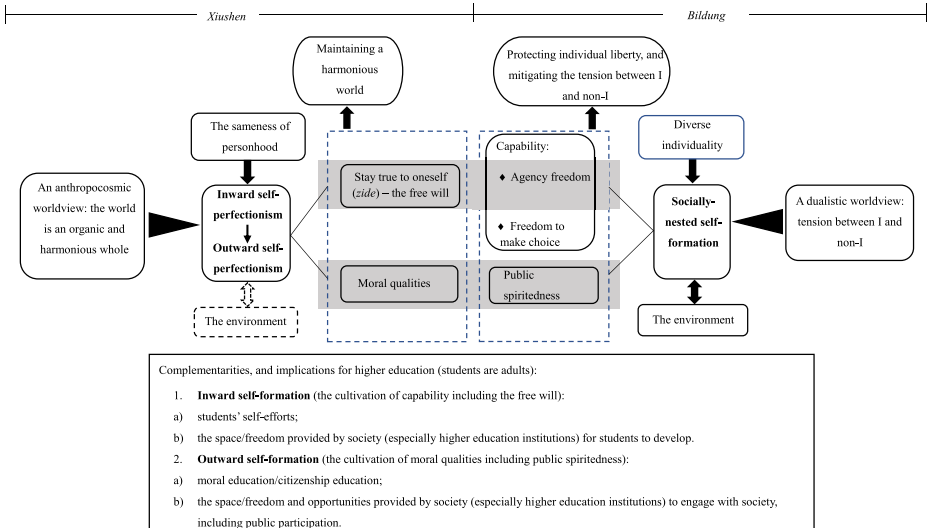


Fig. 2 An outline of the comparison and complementarity between *xiushen* and *Bildung*

Searching for complementarity between *xiushen* and *Bildung*

This section draws on the similarities and differences between *xiushen* and *Bildung* to search for complementarities. It also explores how the complementarities may enlighten student formation in higher education. The aim is not to complement the varying worldviews, the difference between which can hardly be reconciled. The primary focus is on complementing the different assumptions of human beings' natural individuality, and the distinct processes of *xiushen* and *Bildung*.

Both *xiushen* and *Bildung* have strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, *xiushen* affirms every individual's equal potential and natural capacity and foregrounds an individual's personal efforts and qualities including diligence and determination. *Xiushen's* emphasis on personal efforts and determination and *Bildung's* idea of agency freedom, which echoes the free will in *xiushen*, lead to the idea of individual agency in the paper. However, *xiushen* fails to encourage diverse pathways of individual development or to consider the influence of the environment on individual development. For example, there is a lack of recognition of the different outcomes of *xiushen* affected by social inequality. Thus, it is fair to argue that *xiushen* emphasises more on the individual agency, especially an individual's personal efforts and determination, than the environment in an individual's development. On the other hand, *Bildung's* stipulation of the environment is more successful in enabling diverse development of individuals in accordance with their manifold individualities. Nevertheless, in scholars' discussions of *Bildung*, the importance of efforts and determination in individual development is seldom recognised. The assertion of the diversity of individuality, together with the idea of equality of opportunity, arguably reflects that individuals with 'lower' talent or capacity may be provided with fewer opportunities, which can stand in contradiction with the idea of social equity.

It seems that the respective emphases on individual agency and environment by *xiushen* and *Bildung* are mutually complementary. Thus a possible combination of the ideas of *xiushen* and *Bildung* is a complementarity that takes into account both *agency* and *environment* in

individual formation and recognises human beings' *equal potential, and diverse individuality, to be developed*. This combination suggests that the best situation for individual formation is when individual agency is harmonised with the external environment. Such combination points to important implications for understanding and organising student education in higher education. I shall expand on this in the next section.

Concluding remarks: implications for higher education

When students enter higher education, they are expected to have already become self-responsible adults. They need freedom to develop their capability and decide their own pathways throughout higher education (Marginson, 2018, pp. 4, 5). Students begin to undertake a closer engagement with society at universities, beyond their family and local community, which widens and deepens the socially nested aspect of their formation. In addition, in higher education, knowledge plays an important role in the formation of students and the expansion of their autonomy. Marginson (2018, p. 12) argues that academic instructors and students' immersion in knowledge enable and facilitate students' self-transformation. These aspects — the adult status of students, their social engagement, and their immersion in knowledge — make higher education especially important and effective to *xiushen* and *Bildung*.

The complementarity of *xiushen* and *Bildung* suggests that theoretically the optimum situation for individual student development arises when individual agency is harmonised with the external environment. Students' own agency and the provision of space for individual agency to evolve and perform are crucial to their formation. Both students and the environment are essential, which embraces both 'self-formation' and 'other-formation'. On the one hand, students need to be motivated and determined in their own formation and put efforts into that process. On the other hand, society and universities need to provide the room as well as necessary resources and opportunities for students' formation. Notably, the individual-environment interaction and the need to establish a harmonious individual-environment relationship also point to possible roles of higher education in reaching a harmonious balance between humanity and nature. This has become a particularly urgent topic today considering the growing concerns about environmental sustainability. Though this topic is not further investigated in the paper, it opens the door for further discussion.

Specifically in the context of higher education, individuals' capacity for critical thinking, reflection, and reasoning is expected to be an important aspect of student formation in higher education. If both individual agency and environment are considered here, then while society, especially higher education institutions, need to provide the space for students to develop, it is also necessary to emphasise student agency and the student's own efforts, devotion, and determination. The emphasis on students' agency not only points to the need for the individual's own efforts and determination, but implies the need to support and enable *every* individual student to develop. In other words, although individuality is diverse, informed by the idea of *xiushen*, every student is educable and with equal potential. It is possible for any student to achieve their goals as long as she/he is minded to develop, provided she/he has the necessary external support. This idea calls for higher education's efforts in providing equal opportunity for every student to achieve (see more about this in Yang, 2021).

In addition, in relation to the question of free space for development, one distinctive aspect is the freedom of discussion including public discussion. According to *Bildung*, public

discussion is essential to the development of agency freedom. As most students are adults when they commence higher education, they already possess the basic capacity for reason and critical thinking, which enables them to participate in public discussion, in which such capacity is further developed. This freedom of discussion is also enlightening for academic freedom in higher education, though academic freedom depends on whether and how higher education is located in the broader public setting, and is not the same in each culture (see, for example, Marginson, 2014; Zha & Shen, 2018).

As indicated, one of the primary aims of the cultivation of moral qualities/public spiritedness in higher education is to make higher education graduates desirable members of society. On top of graduates' ability to reason and think critically, their sense of responsibility to society is crucial. The desired moral qualities include the individual's commitment to actively serving the collective good and maintaining a harmonious world in the idea of *xiushen*. Such moral qualities are cultivated not only through inward self-perfectionism, but also through external moral education. In *Bildung*, individuals who are publicly spirited actively participate in public affairs and work on mitigating the tension between I and non-I. Public spiritedness can be cultivated through public participation. Therefore, to support students' cultivation of moral qualities including public spiritedness, higher education can be helpful in at least two ways: providing moral education or citizenship education and encouraging and providing opportunities for students to engage with society. In addition, moral education and citizenship education may need to be organised in a way that is compatible with students' development of agency.

However, ideas of *xiushen* and *Bildung* in higher education are facing challenges from the model of human capital (see, for example, Kelly et al., 2010), that is supported by neoliberal ideas and systems, including focus on the acquisition of measured skills and competencies, and measured 'employability', at the expense of ideas about broader development (Meng et al., 2012; Rieckmann, 2012). Neoliberal influence is manifest in the marketisation of higher education, whereby it is modelled in terms of inter-institutional competition and individual/family investment (Maringe et al., 2010). On the one hand, competition is encouraged — universities and students are competing for resources and positions, resulting in the need of measurement of performance, which focuses only on elements such as skills that are open to calibration. As Biesta (2009) indicates, gradually items that are measurable de facto become the end of education. In the commodification of teaching and learning, individual development becomes under-emphasised (Barnes & Jenkins, 2014; Ranson, 2003; Sayer, 2011). On the other hand, students are often regarded as 'consumers' of a higher education understood in terms of economic and social instrumentalism. The student's satisfaction and their later rewards associated with higher education dominate the narrative of higher education (Maringe et al., 2010; Mccaig & Taylor, 2014; Taylor, 2017). Such narratives arguably impede the individual's development of agency by weakening the focus on autonomy.

When individual interests and satisfaction become primary considerations, broader development is neglected and the influence of socially nested *xiushen* and *Bildung* is attenuated. Higher education loses much of its essential functions and responsibilities, including its support for the process of student becoming, the cultivation of student agency, and the preparation of students as desired members of society. Yet these functions are pivotal not only to the self-development and social development of persons, but to the harmony and progress of society.

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