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Cultivating Citizens with Confucian Cosmopolitanism: Defining the Purpose of Liberal Arts Education in the Asian Context

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Abstract In contrast to the continued decline of liberal arts education in the US, there has been a revived interest in liberal arts education in Asian countries in recent years. Grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the central tenets of liberal arts education in the West, this paper looks into the struggles Asian countries face in their exploration of liberal arts education and provides a direction for Asian countries in their efforts to practice liberal arts education. This paper establishes the deep connections between humanistic approaches of the Confucian tradition and liberal arts education by pointing to a common ground for the education of humanity. Ultimately, the purpose of liberal arts education, in the East as well as in the West, should be the liberation of human beings from the constraints of ignorance, prejudice and traditional customs and through the cultivation of a cosmopolitan morality that emphasizes unity, solidarity and the fusion of humankind. Chinese universities should contemplate the purpose and value of higher education in the 21st century and tap into the rich resources of Confucianism in order to give its liberal arts education a “soul.”

Keywords liberal arts education, Confucianism, cosmopolitanism, higher education, Asia/China

Introduction

As a distinct educational approach, liberal arts education seeks to provide college

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students with a broad and solid knowledge foundation in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, so as to inspire them to be critical and independent thinkers and thus productive and responsible citizens (AAC&U, 2002). Such an educational philosophy, which originated in ancient Greece and later developed in Euro-America, is widely regarded as a Western model of higher education. However, it has also been observed that liberal arts education has been following something of a “declension narrative” in the West over the past two centuries (Kimball, 2017), in contrast to the thriving liberal arts education scene in Asian countries in recent years (Boyle, 2020).

Based on Godwin’s (2017) analysis using the Global Liberal Education Inventory (GLEI), which is a database of liberal arts education initiatives, in 2013 there were 183 liberal arts education programs in 58 countries outside the US. Beyond North America, liberal arts education has the strongest presence in Asia, which accounts for 36% of liberal arts education programs. Seventy five percent of those Asian programs are concentrated in China, India, and Japan. During the past couple of decades, many Asian countries have started to strengthen and upgrade their higher education institutions by resorting to the liberal arts models of Western universities. Newly emerging liberal arts programs in Asia include Yuanpei College at Peking University (Beijing, China) in 2007, Po-Ya School at Tunghai University (Taichung, China) in 2008, Boya College at Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou, China) in 2008, the College of Liberal Studies at Seoul National University (Seoul, South Korea) in 2009, S. H. Ho College at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong SAR, China) in 2010, Yale-NUS College at the National University of Singapore (Singapore) in 2011, and Xinya College at Tsinghua University (Beijing, China) in 2014, to name only a few.

While Asian countries seek to strengthen and upgrade their higher education institutions by turning to the liberal arts model of Western universities, they inevitably face challenges and struggles concerning how to indigenize liberal arts programs in their institutions. This article hopes to use China and Chinese universities as an illustrative case to examine the dilemmas and struggles that Asian universities face in their efforts to transplant liberal arts education. The purpose of the article is to illuminate an alternative model, or an East Asian/Confucian model, of liberal arts education through juxtaposing the

Confucian tradition with the cosmopolitan ideal. On that basis, the prospect of designing a culturally responsive and viable liberal arts education guided by Confucian cosmopolitanism in Asian universities will be discussed and examined.

The Evolution of Liberal Arts Education in Euro-America: The Ideal of Cosmopolitanism

Liberal Arts Education and Cosmopolitanism

Liberal arts education originated in ancient Greece and Rome. The word “liberal” has its origin in the Latin word *liberalis*, which traditionally means “suited for the freeborn gentleman” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 30). “The freeborn gentlemen” who had access to education in ancient Greece and Rome were those with means and leisure time, who were thus able to spend time examining themselves and society. They could afford to neglect the profitable outcomes of learning and learn for learning’s sake alone. From this origin derived the second layer of a liberal arts education, which refers to an education that is free from utilitarian or pragmatic considerations. What distinguishes liberal knowledge/pursuits from other knowledge/pursuits is the absence of utility. When knowledge is pursued for its own sake and as an end in itself, it is considered “liberal.” Along with the free and enjoyable exploration of knowledge and truth, a third layer of meaning naturally follows, that is, a liberal arts education ultimately liberates people as it “helps individuals connect with the nature and the entire human race so that they feel liberated from loneliness and anxiety, and thus achieve meaning and happiness” (Cheng, 2017, p. 467). Combining the three layers of meanings, we can argue that the core value of liberal arts education is cosmopolitanism, which also originated from ancient Greece and is represented by a broad world outlook in how one relates to oneself, to others and to the world. As Puente (2015) states: “The underpinning of liberal education is the search for freedom” (p. 146), and the only way to gain this freedom is through obtaining a cosmopolitan view which is essential for developing an autonomous self who is objective and free from bias (Appiah, 2003), and “necessary for sociality and relationship” (Puente, 2015, p. 147).

Originating in ancient Greek philosophy, cosmopolitanism represents a broad

world outlook on how one relates to oneself, to others and to the world. When asked of what country he was a citizen, Socrates replied: “Of the world” (Montaigne as cited in Schattle, 2009, p. 4). As the French essayist Montaigne commented on Socrates: “His was a fuller and wider imagination; he embraced the whole world as his city, and extended his acquaintance, his society, and his affections to all mankind; unlike us who look only under our feet” (Montaigne as cited in Heater, 2004, p. 9). In other words, cosmopolitans claim allegiance to “the community of humankind, and the first principles of their practical thought must respect the equal worth of all members of that community” (Cohen, 1996, p. vii). Diogenes, the famous Cynic of the West who explicitly identified himself with cosmopolitanism, proclaimed himself a citizen of the world by rejecting tradition and local loyalty and focusing on the worth of reason and moral purpose in defining one’s humanity (Appiah, 2008), as the Cynical way of life he lived and advocated was cosmopolitan: “By living in accordance with nature and rejecting what is conventional, the Cynic sets an example of high-minded virtue for all other human beings” (Kleingeld & Brown, 2013).

Following the lead of the Cynics, the Stoics in ancient Rome developed the image of the world citizen more fully arguing that we all live in two communities—the local community of our birth and the universal moral community (Nussbaum, 1997). They believed that being a good person required serving other human beings as best as they could. As the essence of Stoicism, cosmopolitanism for the Stoics means that a citizen of the world should obey the law of nature and that “the law of the world-city must take precedence over the law of the city-state” (Heater, 2004, p. 12). Influential Stoic thinkers include Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius the Emperor who thus explained cosmopolitan: “As long as I remember that I am part of such a whole [Universe],... I shall... direct every impulse of mine to the common interest” (as cited in Heater, 2000, p. 179).

During the Enlightenment period, cosmopolitanism was one of the characteristic features of the age. The most influential cosmopolitan thinker was Immanuel Kant who advanced the ideal of “cosmopolitan law,” and he declared that “the highest purpose of Nature will be at last realized in the establishment of a universal Cosmo-Political Institution, in the bosom of which all the original capacities and endowments of the human species will be unfolded and developed” (as cited in Heater, 2004, p. 56). In other words, the earth belongs to

all in common: Each human being is part of the same world, and thus has equal moral value no matter their ethnicity or nationality. Therefore, cosmopolitans “recognize in persons what is especially fundamental about them, most worthy of reverence and acknowledgement” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 60).

Starting from the late 18th century, nationalism gradually took precedence over cosmopolitanism with the consolidation of the modern state through movements such as the American and French revolutions. One of the reasons for the decline of the appeal of cosmopolitan ideas was the fact that nationalist movements which swept Europe during the 19th century required individuals to be committed citizens of a certain nation-state. Further, the utopian nature of cosmopolitan ideals rendered it less practical and less powerful than nationalist ideas. In fact, the sincerity of those who were committed to cosmopolitanism, who tended to be educated elites, was questioned: Rousseau accused those philosophers of “loving the Tartars, in order to avoid loving his neighbours” (Cobban as cited in Heater, 2004, p. 57).

In spite of the controversy around the concept of cosmopolitanism, it carries great value in educational theory and practice and thus remains quite an influential idea. Heater (2000), in reviewing cosmopolitanism from a historical perspective, argued that the subdued status of cosmopolitan ideas between the 19th and 21st centuries was “an aberration—a mere two-century diversion from the more than two-millennia tradition of possible multiple identity” (p. 184). In fact, he continued to argue that what had happened starting from the late 1900s was “a separation of citizenship from its fusion with nationhood (by intra- and supra-state trends) and the restoration of cosmopolitan thinking” (p. 184). Similarly, Gellner (1983) stated: “Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has come to appear as such” (p. 6).

As the globalization process has provided accelerating forces for countries to connect and converge in recent decades, scholars and intellectuals all over the world have started to seek ways out of cultural clashes and promote inter-civilizational dialogues, international exchanges, and cross-cultural communications. There has been a burgeoning body of literature on multiculturalism, internationalization and globalization, along with waves of population flow across the globe and the emergence of various international organizations, all of which have enhanced cultural contacts to an unprecedented degree and reshaped relations between locals and strangers. Against this backdrop, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been revived. As Hansen (2010)

claimed, scholars over the world in both social sciences and humanities have reanimated the ancient idea of cosmopolitanism, which seems to be returning as a philosophical lens for interpreting how people in contemporary societies engage in cross-cultural interactions. While multicultural discourses are geared to ethnic diversity and social justice within a nation-state, the insights of cosmopolitanism inspire people to become better prepared to tackle complicated issues that hinder cross-cultural understanding on a global scale, such as parochialism and ethnocentrism (Gao & Yang, 2020).

Liberal Arts Education and Its Decline in the West

Being a cosmopolitan means being able to transcend ignorance, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness, and eventually being able to achieve unity and solidarity for humankind. With such a non-utilitarian and non-pragmatic ideal of cosmopolitanism, liberal arts education originally devoted itself to the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic development of “the whole person” through the study of the arts, humanities, and pure sciences, which dominated higher learning in the West for a long time. However, with the growing industrial economy and the rise of professions, the dominating position of liberal arts education as the “proper” college model was challenged in the 19th century by the establishment of the German model of the research university on the one hand, and American land-grant universities which sought to link higher education with local economic needs on the other. Both specialization and vocationalization forced liberal arts colleges to change, albeit in different directions. As a response, liberal arts colleges had to either upgrade to research-focused universities or add professional programs to cater to the changing needs of the society since it was widely held that “Colleges should train citizens to participate in the nation’s economic and commercial life... through the offering of career-oriented programs buttressed by general education electives” (Lattuca & Stark, 2001, p. 4). Although there were occasional defenses for liberal arts education, such as the *Yale Report* in 1828 and John H. Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1852), the coming decades witnessed a process of continuous erosion of liberal arts education and increasing diversification of higher education.

While liberal arts education struggled for survival amidst rapid industrial and social changes, the concept of general education emerged as a counteraction and

remedy to the irreversible trends of specialization and vocationalization towards the end of the 19th century. In the US, it arose alongside the elective system, which was first introduced by the then Harvard President Charles W. Eliot in 1869, and the subsequent demands for courses that more suited students' interests and needs (Committee on General Education, 2006). The 1920s and 1930s represented a transitional period from the classical form of liberal arts education to general education where the latter "became a realm in which the ideal of a holistic education was to be realized" (Yee, 2013, p. 52).

Liberal arts education continued to decline during the post-World War Two period when access to postsecondary education among students formerly excluded from colleges was enhanced through the two G. I. Bills (signed by President Roosevelt in 1944 and President Truman in 1952, respectively) and the flourishing of community colleges in the US. The rapid expansion of access to higher education further pushed liberal arts education, along with its non-utilitarian, leisurely pursuits, to a defensive position, whereas general education, with a similar cosmopolitan ideal yet more inclusive and more compatible with diverse educational goals, was deemed timely and appropriate for a diverse student body from different cultural and knowledge backgrounds. During the 1940s and 1950s, general education solidified its independent identity separate from its predecessor—the classical liberal arts education. Two landmark reports, *General Education in a Free Society* in 1945 and *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* in 1947, openly advocated the essential role of general education in colleges and universities which aim to "educate all citizens for the purpose of creating a better nation and a better world" (Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, & Blaich, 2005, p. 7). Since then, general education won widespread popularity and superseded traditional liberal arts education as a crucial component of college learning.

James B. Conant (1945), the former President of Harvard University, considered general education a successor to the ideals of liberal arts education, a variation of liberal arts education that caters to the needs of a changing society in the 20th century. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) clarified the relationship between liberal arts education and general education by defining general education as part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students which "provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the

basis for developing important intellectual and civic capacities” (p. 25).

Regardless of the specific forms and emphases of liberal arts education in different historical periods, its core value as a humanistic approach remains. It is the kind of education that gives one freedom as it helps to educate a “rounded person with full understanding of himself and of his place in society and in the cosmos” (Conant, 1945, p. 52), and a person who can transcend “the constraints of habit, custom and inertia” (Martin, 1981, p. 54). Furthermore, the kind of freedom embedded in liberal arts education can only be achieved through cultivating cosmopolitan values and ideals, i.e., making one a member of the human community and cosmos.

The Asian Liberal Arts Education Dilemma: More of the Same?

Rooted in Confucian traditions, Asian universities face significant challenges in implanting a liberal arts education which is built upon Western philosophical foundations. Blind copying without due attention to the cultural traditions and sociopolitical contexts of the local settings is deemed as one of the most prominent problems. In speaking of the vision for Yale-NUS College, the Prime Minister of Singapore stated that it is

not a replica of Yale, but a bold effort to create something new and different... [where the college] takes the best of US liberal arts education from Yale, New Haven, adds NUS’ distinctive Asian and global strengths, adapts this mix to our different social and cultural contexts, and creates an experience which is more relevant to students. (Prime Minister’s Office, 2012)

This statement reflects the struggles Asian universities go through in adopting the liberal arts education model. As Cheung (2012) put it:

Will Asia be just producing more of the same of the Western-originated contemporary higher education model, or will it be able to unleash a more critical understanding and practice of higher education, a cultural and epistemological reflection of the role of universities as venues of higher

learning? (p. 186)

It is important to note that Asia is not a monolithic whole. Instead, it covers various nations with diverse histories, cultures, and languages as well as huge differences in political systems and economic development levels. However, it is our argument that Asian countries share many commonalities in negotiating relationships with the Western powers of the Euro-American world. As most Asian countries are either developing/rising, such as China, India or Vietnam, or newly industrialized, such as Singapore, South Korea or Japan, they hold a similar “catch-up mentality” (Li, 2017) which pushes them to borrow ideas, practices, and technologies from the developed world, while at the same time hoping to strengthen their own uniqueness. It is against this background that we discuss the “Asian dilemma” as manifested in the encounter with the Western models of liberal arts education. We will use China as an illustrative case here because China has been struggling with the dilemma most acutely during the drastic expansion and reform of its higher education system in recent years.

China is noted for its long history of Confucian traditions, shared with other East Asian countries, which emphasizes the learning of Confucian classics, morality, and ethics over practical and technical knowledge. While Confucian traditions have played an irreplaceable role in the development of Chinese society, they have been criticized for rigidity, conformity and a lack of critical thinking and innovation, especially during the transition to modernity. There were waves of debates among both Chinese intellectuals and Western scholars about whether Confucianism had served as an impediment or stimulus to China’s modern transformation (Zurndorfer, 2004). In China’s national salvation and self-strengthening efforts in face of foreign invasions since the late Qing dynasty, Confucian-style education was severely attacked as the root of national weakness, and the *keju* (科举), the Imperial Examination, was abolished in 1905, symbolizing the end of the institutionalization and official endorsement of Confucian doctrine by the government (Sun & Du, 2009). Since then, the overwhelming emphasis on the study of Confucian classics gave way to Western science and technology which were viewed as advanced having the promise of building a strong nation. After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, experts and a skilled labor force in science and engineering were urgently needed by the nation in its efforts to build a socialist, modernized, and prosperous country (Hayhoe, 1996). Therefore, science and engineering became

“hot” subjects compared to liberal arts subjects and won great favor among Chinese students and the general public.

At the turn of the 21st century, American models of liberal arts education were adopted by a few top-tier Chinese universities, such as Peking University and Fudan University, in their attempts to build world-class universities (Zhang, 2012). As it stands now, “liberal arts education” has become a catchword in Chinese higher education, representing a broad coverage of disciplines, a solid knowledge foundation as well as innovative and creative capacities, all of which are regarded as essential to an educated person in the 21st century. The *Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China*, an overarching official document promulgated by the central government in March 2016, clearly stated: “a training system combining liberal arts education and specialized education should be implemented in higher education” (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

In the attempts to carry out liberal arts education, many Chinese universities seem to use Western elite universities as the template, with such common features as an emphasis on small classes, individual advising, cross-disciplinary courses, and a delayed choice of major (Jung, 2016). For example, Peking University borrowed many features from Harvard University in designing its general education core courses (Feng, 2018; Pang & Huan, 2016). Nonetheless, differences can be observed in terms of curriculum, administration and governance between liberal arts programs in Chinese higher education institutions and their American counterparts. For example, the former tends to be a part of a comprehensive or research university that functions like an honors college inside a larger university (Jung, 2016), with only a proportion of students placed in the track of liberal arts education instead of the whole body of undergraduates. Even though there may be a small number of the so-called “residential colleges,” such as Yuanpei College at Peking University and Fudan College at Fudan University, they do not operate independently, but remain nested within the university administration as a whole and rely on the academic schools and departments in terms of teaching, learning, and evaluation (Meng & Huang, 2013). These differences reflect an uneasy grafting of liberal arts education onto the specialized training model revolving around schools and departments with fixed boundaries between disciplines, which still dominate the landscape of Chinese higher education.

Need for a Purpose in Education

The various challenges mentioned above, some of which might arguably be addressed through efforts on the technical and managerial level, nonetheless reflect a deeply-rooted perception regarding the purpose of education which is fundamentally different from that of liberal arts education. In other words, in transplanting the liberal arts model to China, it is imperative for universities and all stakeholders, including policy-makers, administrators and faculty, as well as students and their families, to come to terms with what a truly liberal arts education is and what is truly needed for the new generation of college students, which may involve profound changes in their values and mindset.

Mitchell and Seiler (2015) identify two types of defense of liberal arts education, namely, a civic/Jeffersonian rationale which is predicated on the idea that liberal arts education produces good citizens, and an instrumentalist/utilitarian rationale that the dispositions emphasized in liberal arts education are valuable as graduates navigate the job market. They further argue that the purpose of general education in the US lies in the former, i.e., to cultivate shared values for citizens in a democratic society, whereas the motives behind China's push for liberal arts education are "utilitarian" (p. 13). Similarly, Boyle (2019) argues that China's goal in implementing liberal arts education is "a curriculum designed to foster creativity and innovation, thereby advancing the national development agenda" (p. 239). A group of Chinese scholars also acknowledge the increasing instrumental/utilitarian tendency of Chinese higher education as well as Chinese students. For example, Qian Liqun (钱理群), the renowned Chinese scholar and professor at Peking University, calls academically capable students who narrowly focus on their self-interest and treat others as a means of climbing the social ladder, "exquisite self-serving individualists."¹ Liu (2019) thus comments on how students at Peking University set priorities in course selection: "The rationalized logic of meticulously calculating 'gains and losses' permeates every detail of life on campus" (p. 135). The increasing utilitarian orientation may be a common challenge in the contemporary era of higher education. However, it is more of a prominent issue in the Chinese case and the Asian context. In other words, liberal arts education in Chinese universities is pursued more as part of their "excellence" campaign than as a way to enhance

¹ Qian first used the term in his open talk on the Form on Ideal Universities, hosted in Beijing in April 22, 2012. For more information, please visit http://www.360doc.com/content/18/0511/22/33965160_753217332.shtml

the full development of individual students. However, this utilitarian objective with emphasis on competition, efficiency and achievement within a short period of time deviates from the cosmopolitan ideals of liberal arts education which emphasize fusion, unity and solidarity.

In his widely read book *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, Harry R. Lewis (2006), the former Dean of Harvard College, argues that “students need something in which they can achieve excellence and take pride” (p. 11), and that an education without this purpose would be pursuing excellence without a soul. Profound changes concerning the value of education to individuals and the society at large are to be brought about before liberal arts education can truly take root in Chinese universities and benefit next-generation Chinese youth.

Confucian Cosmopolitanism: A Possible Way Out?

In defining the purpose and role of a liberal arts approach to higher education that aligns with their sociocultural and institutional contexts, Asian countries should go beyond the surface features of a Western liberal arts education, such as small classes, flexible major choices, emphasis on critical thinking and innovation capacity. While these might often accompany liberal arts education, they are not what liberal arts education is for. Instead, Asian universities should probe into cosmopolitanism upon which Western liberal arts education is built, as well as the Confucianism of the East Asian educational tradition, in order to come up with an alternative model of liberal arts education that both differs from and shares common ground with the Western model. This article argues that a blend of Confucian cosmopolitanism can be a philosophical tool to guide Asian universities out of their quagmire.

Confucianism and Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is not confined to Western civilization. As Appiah (2008) argues: “this ideal [cosmopolitanism], or something very like it, was independently invented in other continents at other times” (p. 85). For example, the concept of *datong* (大同), or the greater unity, in Confucianism refers to “the world commonwealth in which all men once strove for general welfare and harmony” (Heater, 2004, p. 9), and it is quite similar to the allegiance of

cosmopolitans to humankind. The kind of cosmopolitan mindset is best described by Zhang Zai (张载, 1020–1077), the renowned neo-Confucian scholar of the Song dynasty (960–1279), as follows:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions (Chan, 1963, p. 497).

In fact, cosmopolitanism and Confucianism share fundamental values. As Chen (2020) states: “Philosophically, Confucianism is a form of cosmopolitanism” (p. 45). A cosmopolitan is similar to the kind of individual the Confucian tradition tries to cultivate in that both have a strong sense of social responsibility and the capability to sympathize. Every cosmopolitan argues for some community among all human beings, regardless of social and political affiliation (Kleingeld & Brown, 2013), and the main conception of cosmopolitanism is moral cosmopolitanism because of its strong emphasis on a universal, cosmopolitan ethic (Delanty, 2006). The emphasis on love, empathy, ethics and the human community in cosmopolitanism is similar to the core values of Confucianism. As the core concept of Confucianism, *ren* (仁) is usually translated as “humanity,” “love,” “benevolence,” “human-heartedness,” or “goodness,” and it means compassion, love for people, consideration for people, and especially, concern for people who are in disadvantaged positions.

On the other hand, Confucianism, rooted in traditional Chinese culture, differs from cosmopolitanism as interpreted in the Western world in several ways. First of all, the utopian nature of cosmopolitanism renders it less practical and less powerful than Confucianism, and thus it remains a lofty vision and has been critiqued by many scholars as vain, empty and impractical. For example, Smith (1995) argues that global citizenship lacks a formal status and the long-distance nature of a global political community renders global citizenship rootless and utopian. Indeed, the fact that there is no formal structure (e.g., a world government) in place to implement the idea of world citizenship means that world citizens are “citizens of nowhere” (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 388) and they tend to lack solidarity and commitment on a global scale (Rizvi, 2005). Parekh (2003)

rejects the idea of a global citizen who does not have a “political home” (p. 12). Osler and Starkey (2000; 2001) question the level of commitment of a global citizen to multiple identifies and dynamic cultures. Therefore, for opponents of world citizenship, “cosmopolitans are guilty of an abuse of language by having the impertinence to deploy the word ‘citizenship’ in their discourse; in truth, even the values they seek to promote have little or no meaning outside a state context” (Heater, 2000, p. 180).

In contrast, Confucianism is both a philosophy and an ethic, or in the words of Hansen (2010), an “art of living.” During China’s long dynastic past, Confucianism guided almost every aspect of social life for ordinary Chinese people, providing social norms, customs, and conventions for people to follow, such as education, marriage, family relations, and occupations. It was also a dominating force in the construction of the nation’s politics, law and governance systems. The *keju*, which has had a great impact on China’s intellectuals and their attitudes towards knowledge, with its legacy being influential even today in the form of the *gaokao* (Chinese National College Entrance Examination), is a vivid example of how Confucian values stay connected with people’s daily life.

Second, different from liberal cosmopolitanism that emphasizes a firm commitment to universalism and requires one to treat all members of humanity equally, Confucianism acknowledges that by nature all human beings are the same, but by culture they become different. As Delanty (2006) put it, there are strong and weak conceptions of cosmopolitanism, or in Kleingeld and Brown’s (2013) term, strict and moderate forms. The strong conception, represented by Nussbaum’s liberal cosmopolitanism, implies some kind of exile of individuals from “the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own” (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 15). In other words, you love strangers as much as you do your family and your fellow countrymen. Whereas the weak conception, represented by Appiah’s (2005) rooted cosmopolitanism, is a moderate approach which acknowledges the importance of local context and local origins (Delanty, 2006; Tan, 2019). In his defense of “rooted cosmopolitanism,” Appiah (2005) stated that cosmopolitans are people who construct their lives from whatever cultural resources they find themselves attached to. While liberal cosmopolitanism places stringent, if not impossible, requirements on humanity to treat everybody equally, rooted cosmopolitanism is more practical and allows one to be both a citizen of a particular nation (a local identity) and of the global world (a global identity).

It is the concept of rooted cosmopolitanism that Confucianism finds more common ground with. In Confucianism there is an important concept called *he'erbutong* (和而不同), i.e., harmony with differences, which captures both the unity of humankind and the uniqueness of the individual. Trying to bring the two together, Confucianism rejects the binary framework in Western epistemology that demarcates between *Self* and *Other*, between *Us* and *Them*, and between the individual and the group. As Yang (2020) pointed out, “The conception of the relation between individual and group interests is not one of subordination of one to the other, but rather the mutual dependence between the individual and the group...The idea that one belongs to oneself alone does not have a home in the Confucian tradition” (p. 198).

In other words, it is possible to achieve a peaceful and prosperous human community that is both national and universal in Confucianism. In this respect, Western binary thinking that frames issues in opposite terms and with an individualistic orientation is less constructive to the realization of cosmopolitan ideals, whereas the correlative, mutually beneficial thinking rooted in Confucianism, which takes human relations, rather than “self,” as the priority, holds more promise for the reconciliation between the local and global (Gao & Yang, 2020).

Third, in contrast to the cosmopolitans who look out to the world and start from afar to seek unity and solidarity, Confucianism puts an overarching emphasis on family while at the same time “calls for an expansion of family love to the world community so that universal harmony can be achieved” (Tan, 2019, p. 71). This explains how one can be both rooted and at the same time reaching out to the larger world. Mencius says: “Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated” (*Lao wu lao yiji ren zhi lao, you wu you yiji ren zhi you* 老吾老以及人之老, 幼吾幼以及人之幼; Mencius, 1861, p. 19).

Confucian Cosmopolitanism: An Alternative Model of Liberal Arts Education

As Choo (2020) argued, “Essentially, Confucian cosmopolitanism subscribes to

an embodied cosmopolitanism in which the individual is one fully rooted in his/her specific location and attuned to the fluctuations and rhythms of the natural world” (p. 25). In Confucian cosmopolitanism family has the highest priority, but “there is ethical gradation in care and concern for different persons and communities” (Tan, 2015, p. 170). This is the “ripple effect” of love and compassion which sees oneself “as existing in an innermost circle around which are larger and larger circles representing close family, friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, and ultimately everyone in the world” (Ivanhoe, 2014, p. 26). Confucian cosmopolitanism does not require one to love strangers as much as one does siblings. As Ivanhoe (2014) stated: “Confucians insists that our first and primary duties always remain focused on families. We extend our feelings beyond our families and out to those in the uttermost circle, but our love for them (our allegiance to them) is much less direct or intense” (p. 26). Neville (2012) argued similarly:

[Confucians] had in mind that one should love one’s intimate family members with a closeness and attention to the particularities of family roles that is different from the ways one should love one’s neighbors, which again is different from the ways one should love the citizens of one’s nation and the citizens of other nations. (p. 608)

With the anchor of rootedness in one’s family and community and at the same time extending oneself to the larger world (*tuiji-jiren* 推己及人), Confucianism has the potential to bring cosmopolitanism out of its “citizen-of-nowhere” quagmire. Furthermore, the blend of Confucianism with cosmopolitanism helps shed light on how to realize cosmopolitan ideals in contemporary society as well as how to solve the “Asian dilemma” through the pursuit of a viable liberal arts education in Asian universities.

Confucian cosmopolitanism, with its strong emphasis on moral cultivation and social responsibility, as well as deep concern for the whole human race, could provide an essential corrective to the utilitarian mindset that has proved detrimental to today’s education in general and to Asian universities in particular. In Confucianism, *junzi* (君子, the morally exemplary man) is “a cosmopolitan self who, through a process of lifelong learning, trains himself to be responsive to his community and the world at large which then represents the teleological end of education” (Choo, 2020, p. 30). As Ames (2011) argued, Confucianism is

the role of ethics that strive for harmony in family, community, and society at large. In other words, the ultimate purpose of education under Confucian cosmopolitanism is neither knowledge nor skill acquisition for the sake of intellectual excellence as in “knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” but moral cultivation through which one “seeks to enrich the self, to enhance its strength and to refine its wisdom so that one can be considerate to others and honest with oneself” (Tu, 1985, p. 68). Therefore, Confucian cosmopolitanism can help to shift the focus of today’s utilitarian and “consequentialist” approach of liberal arts education “from competencies to dispositions and “from skills to routines” and thus “dispositional routines” (Choo, 2020, p. 26).

Further, liberal arts education that cultivates Confucian cosmopolitan values helps to educate individuals with open-mindedness, empathy/compassion, respect for diversity/difference, and concern for others. While multicultural scholars are correct to point out the necessity to bring together people from different backgrounds and celebrate diversity, such good will is hard to carry out in reality without seriously modifying the ways we are brought up to think and live (Gao & Yang, 2020). In consideration of the current asymmetries in global knowledge and values, it is even harder for different nations/civilizations to truly cooperate in mutual understanding. In this respect, Confucianism could perhaps provide a new path to achieve cosmopolitan goals through re-emphasizing its century-old wisdom of *ren*. As mentioned above, the core concept of *ren* in Confucianism is often interpreted as compassion or benevolence. Such a human emotion is more fundamental and universal to humankind than the cosmopolitan values of appreciation and respect for difference, and therefore helps to build solidarity and unity between people from diverse backgrounds. For example, Mencius gives the example of a child who is about to fall into a well. Anyone who sees it will experience alarm and distress, which shows that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others. This feeling of commiseration is the principle of *ren*, essential and common to everyone. The ultimate goal of Confucian education is to achieve *ren*. Only through achieving *ren* can one overcome the ego and find peace with the whole of humanity and the universe. In this sense, the Confucian concept of *ren* offers an alternative route for people to relate to others, to feel others’ pain and joy, and to understand the common predicament and vulnerability of humanity. This route might prove to be a more practical and less contentious approach to liberal arts education than

multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism.

In addition, centered on human harmony and interrelatedness, Confucian cosmopolitanism could transcend the dichotomous thinking in the Western scholarly tradition and reconcile the local and the cosmopolitan selves. In the Confucian worldview, every individual is connected with others in a web of interpersonal relationships, which defines and organizes his or her existence. “The Western assumption of an independent, self-directed individual is alien to Confucianism and is therefore discouraged” (Yang, 2020, p. 201). At the same time, another emphasis of Confucianism is *li* (礼, ritual), which points to the importance of human relations or *guanxi* (关系) and the embeddedness of *Self* and *Other*. In Confucian philosophy, the law with coercive regulations and punishment plays a secondary role in shaping human behavior. Instead, morality and ritual are the main mechanisms of social governance through moral exhortation and a collective sense of honor (Yang, 2020). This is compatible with the important goal of liberal arts education, i.e., to liberate people from isolation, loneliness, insecurity and anxiety, and provide a common binding and cohesiveness for the society. As Neville (2012) argues, “humaneness can be enhanced through relating to others not only as others to be appreciated and respected but also as fellow-players in the rituals of interaction” (p. 601).

Concluding Remarks

The globalization process, which has brought countries closer, especially since the end of World War Two, has also created a counterforce against globalization—deglobalization, which is characterized by the prioritizing of national protectionism and a retreat from global integration (Balsa-Barreiro, Vié, Morales, & Cebrián, 2020; James, 2018). Many consider the 2016 Brexit referendum and the victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election as the hallmark events of this counterforce worldwide (Balsa-Barreiro et al., 2020; James, 2018). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has added momentum to this deglobalization trend not only along the line of financial resources but also along the line of political and social values. The world has ushered in a post-neoliberal era in which neoliberal globalization has given way to authoritarian populism causing further ideological polarization and social fragmentation which have further divided the world along the lines of race, class and citizenship (Boyte,

2017; Peters, 2018). It is because of the anti-immigration and anti-integration orientation as well as the nativist and xenophobic values underlying populism that we need more than ever before to uphold the cosmopolitan and multicultural ideals which will help to promote unity and enhance solidarity among people.

Indeed, as Neville (2012) states, “The volatility of the world situation, or even of the cultural-political situation in the United States, makes the actualization of a more nearly functional cosmopolitan culture an urgent need” (p. 595). In this regard, education, especially liberal arts education, plays an important role in “connecting the *facts* of cosmopolitan encounters and the *values* that cosmopolitanism espouses” (Rizvi & Beech, 2017, p. 126, emphasis original), and in providing a cosmopolitan vision of unity and solidarity for mankind. As Rifkin (2010) states: “... the central human quality... was empathy for one another” (p. 8).

Nussbaum, the adamant proponent of liberal arts education calls the cultivation of such values “cultivating humanity,” as the title of her well-known 1997 book suggests. She further argues, “Marcus Aurelius insisted that to become world citizens we must not simply amass knowledge; we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85). What Aurelius calls “sympathetic imagination” is similar to what Nussbaum calls “narrative imagination,” which “involves the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame” (pp. 90–91). Hansen (2011), the Columbia professor who has done extensive research on cultivating cosmopolitan values through education, called it a “cosmopolitan-minded education” which can “help people recognize... common features [of human life] as a renewed basis for mutual understanding and cooperation” (p. 2). He emphasized that this education focuses on “intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic journeying” instead of “physical movement” (p. 2).

In the 21st century, Asian countries are playing an important role in advancing liberal arts education in the global landscape of higher education. However, in implementing liberal arts education, they need to go beyond blindly copying the Western model and strive to develop a distinctive alternative model that aligns

with their own knowledge traditions, such as the Confucian ideas of education. In fact, when going beyond the surface level, one may find deep connections between those humanistic approaches of Confucian tradition and liberal arts education in espousing cosmopolitan ideals. Through tracing the historical and philosophical developments of liberal arts education in the West and in the East, this article argues that Asian universities, and Chinese universities in particular, could benefit from tapping into the rich resources of Confucian cosmopolitanism in designing a culturally responsive, viable liberal arts education which is needed more than ever in promoting global understanding and global peace, thus building a global community with solidarity, in an increasingly divided world we are living in today.

The purpose of education is not to compete or divide, but to unite, to collaborate, to improve understanding and to make changes for the better. Confucian cosmopolitanism can give excellence a soul, education a direction, the world some warmth, and humanity some hope.

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