



# The Analysis and Inspiration of Implementing Confucius and Plato's Educational Philosophies in the History of China and Europe

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**Abstract.** This paper introduces and compares the original education ideology of Confucius and Plato's educational philosophies, and discusses the differences in education equality, opinions on family education, the teaching process, the relationship of the teacher and students, and the purpose of education. It is apparent that they have quite distinct beliefs in these areas which potentially causes the distinction of educational development in China and Europe. Moreover, this article analyses the implementation of philosophies in Chinese and European history by comparing the revolutionary changes in the education system of the two regions. The main manifestation in China is the Chinese Imperial Examination as it interpreted Confucius' educational structure. The revolutionary changes in the European education system mainly discuss the Renaissance that reformed the philosophies of ancient Greek, including Plato's education ideologies. As an inspiration, this paper briefly provides an accessible education model for maximizing the original ideas of Confucius and Plato by combining the modern Chinese teaching material with the modern European education methodology.

**Keywords:** Confucius · Plato · Chinese education · European education

## 1 Introduction

Education has been transforming and evolving since it was first created by Confucius and Socrates in around 400 BC. Contemporary scholars often recognize Confucius as the first teacher in China, and Socrates as the first philosopher in Europe. At the beginning of Education, the "system" of education was not formed due to the lack of access to knowledge and education resources. While teachers such as Confucius and Plato could abide by the original ideology of individualized and enlightened education, they also had some differences in their teaching methods and attitudes. The differences between ancient Chinese and European education kept widening and further caused the divergence in modern educational philosophies.

## 2 Confucius on Education

The social system of China was fundament on agriculture and serving higher social classes and the emperor. Education at the time was in the form of individual teaching, meaning teachers were not trained professionals and they taught others by their own knowledge and perceptions [1]. Such education methodology creates diversification in society as people are not acquiring unified information because of the lack of systematic standardization in the teaching materials. While unsystematic education could provide diversity, it can also cause disunified social values.

## 3 Comparing Plato with Confucius' Education

### 3.1 Education Equality

Plato suggested that education equality is among all social statuses, genders, and ages [2]. Comparatively, Confucius neglected the education chances of women, since he believed men were the major gender for contributing to decision making [3]. Such inequality has circulated in China for millenaries, and it is detectable in modern Chinese education up to this time, as many parents still favour sending boys to school rather than girls for a couple of decades ago.

### 3.2 Family Education

Plato also promoted the importance of youth education, so he suggested public education for children. Confucius accepts all age groups to receive his education, which potentially increases the inequality of individuals because of the different social values they have received from their family educations. According to Plato, family education is the foremost cause of conflicting social values. The inequality emerges from childhood during the imperceptible teaching from the parents, and further causes split even when receiving the same education [4].

### 3.3 Teaching Process

The methodology of the education process in the Republic is similar to Confucius'. They both contain logical development in the form of communication. Confucius and Plato both provide the answers gradually by guiding students to delve into the problem, the progress is led by students' constant questions. Or questioning back to the students and leading them to their own solutions [5].

### 3.4 Relationship of Teacher and Students

In terms of their attitudes on the relationship between students and teachers. Confucius esteemed the importance of students' admiration towards teachers. Enormous respect for the teacher was documented in *Analects of Confucius* (a book that documented some teaching processes of Confucius). The tradition of paying respects to teachers also resulted in a "teacher-centered" education model once the schooling system was founded in China.

### 3.5 Purpose of Education

In *Analects of Confucius*, it documented Confucius' one of the most significant values as the notion of "Ren". Ren includes the concepts of "human kindness, benevolence, and goodness" [6]. Certainly, each individual is unique with different pursuits, but according to Confucius, Ren is the essential value of individuals to fund a stable society. Teachers should enlighten students to explore their passion with the premise of Ren. Moreover, Confucius supposed the educator's prerequisite of such ability is crucial for the build-up of social structure. In detail, Confucius believed everyone has equal rights to acquire education for the maximum nourishment of themselves [3]. The access to knowledge for an individual is often related to their social status, however, it should not be the barrier to receiving education. In addition, Confucius believed the concept of Ren is not limited by the access to knowledge, because it is an inner practice rather than simple physical usage. For his students, he required them to have an infinite curiosity of knowledge exploration for the purpose of becoming "enlightened". Becoming an enlightened person is the essential goal of Confucius educational philosophy [7].

In terms of study areas, Plato values the subjects for students including aesthetics, political philosophy, theology, cosmology, epistemology, and the philosophy of language. He promotes these fields of study for understanding the notion of "love" and being "loving". Compared to Confucius' Ren, Plato preached to students' exploration of natural science and abstract, logical thinking. Significant evidence is the different opinions and attitudes towards poetism. Confucius valued poetism as the bridge to inner practice, as it can clean up the mind, reflect on social problems, and train the ability of critical thinking [3].

The slight differences between the two educators are also reflected in their later education and social development.

## 4 Comparing Different Implementations of Educational Philosophies in China and Europe

Despite the differences in the range of study and education focuses, Plato's preaches of "Love" and Confucius' and "Ren" are similar in terms of educational methodologies as they both promote individualized teaching for unleashing the potential of the students. China and Europe have been implementing the wisdom of Confucius and Plato in their own regions for thousands of years. Because of their different ways of implementation throughout history and it is inspirational to learn from the outcomes.

### 4.1 China

#### 4.1.1 Imperial Examination

The most significant education system in Chinese history is the "Imperial Examination" (KeJu), which was established in the Sui dynasty around 600 AD. And until 1904, the Chinese emperors continued to utilize this educational system. The Imperial Examination further complied with Confucius' recognition of the relationship between education and politics, functioned as the bridge for everyone to work for the ruler with equal chances.

Since it provides the lower classes with the opportunity to change classes, it improves the social structure and conforms to the needs of society. But it also distorts the purpose of the study. Examinees who passed the exam could obtain enormous respect from the others as well as the emperor. As a consequence, citizens gradually became machines for passing the examination, especially for the lower classes [8].

The examination also acted as a catalyst for the development of the Chinese schooling system as it provided a unified curriculum for the students. Some ancient works were being recognized and then became the testing range of the exam.

#### 4.1.2 Gaokao

In 1904, China abolished the Imperial Examination and stepped into contemporary education, however, the elements of it still transmitted to the modern Chinese Education. The most competitive examination “Gaokao” (college entrance examination) inherited the ideology of Imperial Examination, and consequently, modern Chinese students are still competing for it desperately. The implemented ideology of “changing fate” from the students and superabundance of political purpose from the government extended the remaining Imperial Examination in the form of “Gaokao” [8].

Both Imperial Examination and Gaokao have common testing methods that require a profusion of memorization and are strictly limited by the scope of the curriculum. Such implementation has the tendency of eliminating the creativeness and rational thinking of a student, which is applicable for achieving a politically desirable state, but it has lack of enlightenment for students’ individual inspirations.

Education is never only a set of school systems for parents to hand over to their children according to both Plato and Confucius. In fact, Confucius also demonstrated the importance of rational thinking. Confucius describes rational thinking as understanding principles behind everything, and the ability to infer [3]. Unfortunately, in modern Chinese education, a great quantity of parents relies heavily on the schools for the responsibility of education. The schools in China then became the place for knowledge and skill learning rather than inspiring students. As a consequence, modern Chinese students are often seen as lacking in creativity and self-consciousness [9].

## 4.2 European

Comparatively, European education in the same time period did not have a systematic educational selection as the Chinese Imperial Examination, but they still have the same political purpose for education. People did not have equal chances to access education, as the social structures of Europe were mainly divided into multiple tangible classes. Additionally, they had a lack of examination system for the lower classes to move up, which resulted in education monopolization. The purpose of education never changed since Plato’s Republic: to serve the higher classes and the King for a steady society. Moreover, society was eminently dependent on the power and authority of the church, which is another element that catalysed the educational inequality [10].

Both ancient China and Europe had educational inequality because of political reasons, including social classes, advocacy, and protection of feudalism. However, the most considerable events that create enormous differences in European education are the

Renaissance, as they challenged the dominance of authorities and the feudalism gospel. Although the Renaissance focused less on the educational revolution, the process motivated the educational evolution by emancipating citizens' thoughts and attitudes towards life. The inspiration of people's individual values in the Renaissance weakened the absolute power of religion, had positive impacts on social development. People started to be encouraged for self-exploration, and ancient philosophers such as Aristotle became the new belief instead of religion [11]. With the reformation of ancient works of Greek and Rome, the philosophies mentioned previously in ancient Greek were brought back to education in the 15th century in Europe. According to Da Vinci, debating by relying on the authorities shows a lack of rational thinking. The Renaissance advocated for people to focus on critical thinking instead of blindly following authority, which not only pushed the development of democracy, but also enlightened people to rethink their abilities as individuals. Such ideology is demonstrated in modern European and American education, where people are mostly motivated by individualized desires rather than a centralized objection as in China. The Renaissance is the most successful movement that enlightened people's ability of rational thinking. As Plato stated in his Republic, only when people can think rationally, the more truthful information can be received.

## 5 Analysis

From the comparison of the Imperial Examination with the Renaissance, the education of China and Europe both had noticeable transformations throughout history. The Renaissance in Europe liberated the ancient philosophies, assisted them with the establishment of universities and furthermore stepped into the realm of science. In this case, the ideology of individualized education was truly accomplished. With the influences of Plato and Confucius, the educational developments in Europe and China are logical to be different despite their ultimate expectations for students being highly identical, because of the divergence in their methodologies of teaching. European is comparatively more democratically and inspirational than the Chinese evidently in the modern educational methods.

The traditional principles of reverence to teachers restricted the class models for China that have been sustained for more than a thousand years since Confucius. Confucius believed in the equality of receiving education for everyone, but he also recognized one of his students as "the student who cannot be taught" if he finds a student is lazy and reluctant to think rationally. [3]. Apparently, the equality of education for Confucius is only limited to the level of receiving knowledge, but not the furnishing of full enlightenment for an individual. This differentiates him and Plato as the latter believes everyone can be equally inspired to reach their potential. The tendency of this difference is reflected in modern education. Chinese schools strictly follow the curriculum and neglect individualized enlightenment despite the extreme difficulties of the learning materials. It explains the dominance of China in world academic competitions.

European education, on the other hand, is relatively easier in terms of learning materials. Study areas in European schools contain as many subjects as Chinese but with a significant reduction in difficulties [12]. This allows less resistance to the study process, and it functions better on self-exploration. Teachers can lead students towards their own interests and therefore, reach the goal of enlightened education as Plato recommended.

With the lengthy history of educational development in China and Europe, the original philosophies from Confucius and Plato are mostly inherited from modern society and are shown in the current education.

Undeniably, Chinese education also has many traits that are beneficial both to the individuals and the social structure, which arguably explains the sustainability of the steady social system throughout Chinese history. Plato also has his conception of building a steady social structure which is also inextricably related to education. In contrast to the methodology of suppressing the citizens as the emperors in Chinese dynasties, Plato wished for a “philosopher King” who would rule the society. The King is required to have a multitude of knowledge with more importantly, the mind of enlightening everyone. Philosophy studying is the essence for the King building up a steady social structure.

## 6 Conclusion

The explanations of educational differences are diversified once with the involvement of historical factors. Among all the analyses, the concept of individualized education always takes part in the discussion of educational philosophies. The Chinese educational ideologies are now a part of the tradition, with the lack of self-consciousness compared to the Europeans, it would be extremely difficult to change. In addition to the worldwide awareness of globalization, the ability of rational thinking for citizens has become increasingly more important. Therefore, modern policies in China attempting to reform the traditional educational philosophies could be deficient to reach the ideal state of enlightening people to fit in with globalization.

For the reform of Chinese education, to reach the desirable status of social structure as well as educational purpose, the biggest challenge is the implementation of their educational orientations. A feasible method is to combine Platonism with Confucius' ideology, and achieve inspirational teaching in youth education. It allows people to enrich themselves and contribute to society simultaneously. For the most part, it is always more accessible for China to reform its education methodologies based on Confucius. But European ideas can be put into practice, without forcing students to memorize them mechanically. Ever since the imperial Examination, Chinese education has been evaluating students based on their ability to memorize. The excessive mechanical method of learning eliminates the innovativeness and curiosities of the students, which is beneficial for political reasons in the short term as it creates stability in society. But another consequence is lacking rational thinking among people which is devastating for society's evolution and improvement. Whereas the European schools requires multiple scales for student evaluations, and they provide several chances each year for students to take the entrance examination, including daily works, class participation, grades, recommendation letters and activities. Practically, the methods and process of the European evaluation for students can be a reference for China, starting from setting more alternative assessing scales that can be flexible for each region or school and less the weight of testing scores.

On the global scale, changing the education system means reaching individuals' maximum potential for better function of the society, and it would be easier to start with advanced education first. The current advanced education provides people with

the knowledge of their chosen major. However, with the over-differentiated field of studies, the teaching material becomes more focused on techniques rather than theories. Techniques form workers, but theories are the keys to enlightenment in education. The differentiation narrows down the study area for concentrated studying, but the knowledge from the other fields is also crucial for forming innovations and creations. Compared to the ancient study areas of Confucius and Plato, they both suggested students acquire knowledge in multiple fields for maximizing their rational thinking abilities.

Certainly, modern society has prompted people for the technical and professional training for the competency of a work, which led to the current education purpose of specified studying in advanced education. And the main reason for such pursuit is the sense of materialism. The ideal way of changing this is to educate people on a super material pursuit and form new social norms of enlightening rational thinking for free will to embody individuals' significance and contribution to society.

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