Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Education: Insights and Implications for Contemporary Education

Filosofia da Educação Chinesa Antiga: Insights e Implicações para a Educação Contemporânea

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Chinese philosophy of education, especially through the Confucian thought of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, is a profound system of thought, emphasizing the cultivation of morality, wisdom, and social responsibility in education. Set in the context of Chinese feudal society, these philosophies focus on character training, combining knowledge with virtue, and positioning education as a means to achieve personal and social harmony. The study sheds light on how these ideas address fundamental questions of educational purpose and methods, and assesses their implications in the face of modern challenges, such as ethical issues in technology education, academic achievement pressures, and the need for comprehensive development of students. Ancient Chinese educational philosophy helps shape comprehensive, responsible, and sustainable educational models in Vietnam and around the world.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of Education, Confucianism, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Moral Education, Personality Development, Modern Education, Vietnam.

RESUMO

A antiga filosofia da educação chinesa, especialmente por meio do pensamento confucionista de Confúcio, Mêncio e Xunzi, é um profundo sistema de pensamento que enfatiza o cultivo da moralidade, da sabedoria e da responsabilidade social na educação. Situadas no contexto da sociedade feudal chinesa, essas filosofias se concentram na formação do caráter, combinando conhecimento com virtude e posicionando a educação como um meio para alcançar a harmonia pessoal e social. O estudo esclarece como essas ideias abordam questões fundamentais de propósito e métodos educacionais e avalia suas implicações diante dos desafios modernos, como questões éticas na educação tecnológica, pressões por desempenho acadêmico e a necessidade de desenvolvimento integral dos alunos. A antiga filosofia educacional chinesa ajuda a moldar modelos educacionais abrangentes, responsáveis e sustentáveis no Vietnã e em todo o mundo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filosofia da Educação, Confucionismo, Confúcio, Mêncio, Xunzi, Educação Moral, Desenvolvimento da Personalidade, Educação Moderna, Vietnã.

1. Introduction

Ancient Chinese philosophy of education, especially through Confucian thought, established a profoundly humanistic thought system that emphasized the combination of ethics, knowledge, and social responsibility in education. Formed during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (6th-3rd centuries BC), these ideas, represented by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, not only shaped Chinese feudal education but also left a deep mark on East Asian countries, including Vietnam. In the context of turbulent ancient society, when political conflicts and moral crises shook the social order, Confucian philosophy of education proposed a learning model aimed at training ethical individuals capable of contributing to the stability and harmony of the community (Feng & Newton, 2012). This philosophy is not only theoretical but also practical, providing a framework for nurturing character and intellect, thereby directing individual behavior in accordance with the collective interest.

Unlike many modern Western educational philosophies, which often prioritize individualization or pragmatic goals such as developing career skills, ancient Chinese educational philosophy places an emphasis on community and morality (You et all., 2018). Education, from a Confucian point of view, is not only a process of imparting knowledge but also a journey of personality development, towards a balance between self-improvement and social responsibility. Confucian thinkers posed fundamental questions: How does education combine knowledge with ethics? What is the role of the educator in shaping the personality of the student? And how can education contribute to the betterment of society? By addressing these questions, Confucian philosophy asserts that learning is a moral mission, in which

knowledge is only valuable when associated with humane behavior. Confucius emphasized that the goal of education is to train "junzi," who have noble character, who act for the common good. Mencius added that education must arouse an innate goodness, while Xunzi argues that education should reform the evil nature through discipline and courtesy. The combination of these perspectives has created a holistic educational model that focuses not only on academics but also on the development of the whole person. At the core of Confucian educational philosophy is the blending of three elements: morality (humaneness and propriety), knowledge (intellect), and practical action (action). Morality is the foundation, with humaneness (benevolence) considered as a core value, expressed through empathy and responsibility for others. Propriety (standard of conduct) is a specific expression of humaneness, regulating social relationships to ensure harmony (Du and Li, 2024). Knowledge is emphasized through intellectual discipline, which encourages critical thinking and self-learning, but is always tied to ethics to avoid becoming a tool for personal gain. Practical action is a measure of the value of knowledge, when learners are encouraged to apply knowledge to life, from family management to contributing to society. These elements form a consistent ideological system in which education is geared towards training individuals who are not only wise but also responsible to the community.

In the context of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when education was often reserved for the elite and served political power, the Confucian philosophy was revolutionary when it proposed equal education (Huang, 2022). Confucius, with the idea of "education without distinction" (education without class barriers), expanded learning opportunities for everyone, thereby promoting equity in access to knowledge (Mu et all., 2013). Mencius emphasizes that education needs to arouse innate moral potential, while Xunzi emphasizes the role of discipline and the learning environment in shaping personality. This combination not only shaped ancient Chinese education but also influenced East Asian countries, including Vietnam, where Confucian values were localized to fit the local culture and society.

In the 21st century, as global education systems face challenges such as the rapid development of technology, cultural globalization, and the pressure of academic achievement, ancient Chinese educational philosophy offers valuable lessons. In Vietnam, where educational reforms are striving to combine traditional values with global competence, Confucian thought provides a framework for building a comprehensive education that emphasizes both academics and ethics. Principles such as moral education, the blending of knowledge and character, and the ethical role of the educator can be applied to solve modern problems. In the age of technology, issues such as data privacy, abuse of artificial intelligence, and the spread of misinformation require ethical consideration, which Confucian philosophy emphasizes through cultivating the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Similarly, in the context of exam pressure in Vietnam, Confucian thought suggests the integration of ethics and social responsibility

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into the curriculum, ensuring that students are not only trained to achieve but also to live meaningful lives.

The Confucian educational philosophy also brings value in building inclusive and sustainable learning environments. In the context of globalization, combining traditional values such as compassion, respect, and community spirit with modern skills such as critical thinking and digital skills is necessary to prepare students for an interconnected world. Moreover, the idea of harmony between humans and nature in Confucianism can guide the development of educational programs on sustainable development, encouraging students to act responsibly with the environment. The role of the educator as a moral role model, as suggested by Confucius and Confucian thinkers, remains valuable in building trust and respect in the classroom, especially in online education, where teachers need to demonstrate integrity and empathy.

2. Research Methods

This research is carried out on the basis of dialectical materialism and historical materialism methodology to analyze ancient Chinese philosophy of education in the relationship between social context, ideological content, and contemporary values. First of all, the dialectical materialist method is used to consider the educational thought of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi as a system of movement and development, in which the internal contradictions, between good and evil natures, between knowledge and morality, between the individual and society, identified and settled according to the law of inheritance and development. This approach helps to clarify the unity between theory and practice, between learning and practice, which is characteristic of Confucian educational philosophy.

In addition, the historical materialist method is applied to place Confucian ideas in the specific context of the Spring and Autumn period, the Warring States period, when Chinese society was in a crisis of morality and political order. The analysis of the relationship between historical conditions and the formation of thought helps to clarify the regularity and practical value of this educational philosophy. In addition to the above two main methods, the research also combines philosophical analysis, synthesis, and comparison to systematize the content and point out the significance of Confucian thought for modern education. This combination ensures the comprehensiveness, objectivity, and depth of reasoning when evaluating ancient philosophy of education from the perspective of sustainable development and humanity.

3. Research Results

3.1. Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Education

In the challenging historical context of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when Chinese feudal society faced political decay and moral crises, Confucian educational philosophy emerged as a

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solution to re-establish social order. Confucius, who is considered to have laid the foundations of Confucianism, emphasized that education was the way to achieve the ideal of the "junzi," who had a noble personality who acted for the common good and not for personal gain (Tan, 2017). He believes that learning is not only about imparting knowledge but also about nurturing personality, encouraging learners to become socially responsible individuals. Mencius, who inherited Confucius' thought, affirmed that human beings are born with good nature, and that education must play a role in arousing and nurturing innate compassion through self-reflection and moral training. Meanwhile, Xunzi offered a more pragmatic view, arguing that human nature is inherently evil and needs to be reformed through discipline, etiquette, and the learning environment. The combination of these perspectives has created a multi-dimensional educational model, focusing not only on academics but also on the development of integral human beings, capable of contributing to the progress of society (Hu, 2022).

The core of Confucian philosophy of education lies in the blending of three main elements: morality (humaneness and propriety), knowledge (intellect), and practical action (action). Morality is considered the foundation of education, with humaneness (benevolence) as the core value, expressed through empathy, compassion, and responsibility for others. Propriety (standard of conduct) is a specific expression of humaneness, regulating social relationships to ensure harmony between individuals and collectives. Unlike rigid notions of etiquette in some other philosophical schools, propriety in Confucianism is understood as a principle of flexibility, promoting respect and harmony in social interactions. Knowledge, within this framework, is not only the acquisition of knowledge from the canons but also requires intellectual discipline, encouraging critical thinking, self-study, and the ability to analyze independently. However, knowledge is always associated with ethics to avoid becoming a tool for personal interests. Practical action is a measure of the value of knowledge, when learners are encouraged to apply knowledge to real life, from family management, contributing to the community, to participating in national governance activities. These three elements form a consistent ideological system, in which education is not only aimed at the formation of knowledge but also at the formation of individuals of noble character, capable of contributing to the stability and progress of society.

The Confucian philosophy of education was revolutionary in the context of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when education was often reserved only for the elite and served political power. Confucius, with the idea of "education without distinction" (education without class barriers), expanded learning opportunities for everyone, thereby promoting equity in access to knowledge (Zhang et all., 2023). This perspective not only breaks down class barriers but also encourages the development of a diverse intellectual class, contributing to social progress. Mencius added that education must arouse innate moral potential, through the training of compassion and a sense of responsibility. Meanwhile,

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Xunzi emphasized the role of discipline and the learning environment in shaping personality, arguing that education must reform selfish tendencies through strict guidance and courtesy. The combination of these perspectives has created a comprehensive educational model that focuses not only on the impartment of knowledge but also on the development of whole, capable of acting for the common good.

In the context of the 21st century, Confucian educational philosophy continues to offer valuable lessons, especially in addressing modern educational challenges. As global education systems face the rapid development of technology, cultural globalization, and the pressure of academic achievement, the principles of Confucianism, such as moral education, the blending of knowledge and personality, and the moral role of the educator, provide a framework for building an inclusive and accountable education (Tan, 2020). In Vietnam, where educational reforms are striving to combine traditional values with global competence, Confucian thought can guide the design of curricula that integrate ethics into subjects, from literature and history to science and technology. In technology education, Confucian principles can encourage students to consider ethics when using artificial intelligence or data processing, ensuring that technology serves social benefits rather than harms. Similarly, the idea of "inclusive education" can inspire the creation of inclusive learning environments where all students have the opportunity to access knowledge and develop their personality, regardless of their social background. This philosophy also emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature, providing a theoretical foundation for building educational programs on sustainable development, encouraging students to act responsibly with the environment.

3.2. Moral Education in Confucian Philosophy: Ancient Foundations and Contemporary Meaning

Moral education is the main pillar of ancient Chinese educational philosophy, which is considered an indispensable foundation of learning. Confucian thinkers believe that knowledge without morality will become a tool for personal interests, leading to social disharmony (Fengyan, 2004). Therefore, education must begin with the cultivation of virtues such as compassion, honesty, humility, and fairness. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, emphasized that the learner must become a "junzi," that is, a person of noble character, acting for the common good instead of pursuing personal fame. This perspective reflects Confucius' vision of education as a tool for building a harmonious society where each individual contributes to common stability (Feng and Newton, 2012). Mencius, who inherited and developed Confucius' thought, added that education should arouse the innate goodness of human beings, through self-reflection and moral training (Tan, 2021). According to Mencius, humans are born with compassion and the ability to distinguish right from wrong, and the role of education is to nurture these potentials to

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form a complete personality. Xunzi, from a more pragmatic point of view, believes that human nature is inherently evil, and that education must play a rehabilitative role through strict discipline and courtesy, helping learners overcome selfish tendencies to become responsible citizens. The differences in the views of these three thinkers create a multidimensional educational system, emphasizing not only human nature but also on the role of the environment and discipline in shaping personality.

The method of moral education in Confucian philosophy focuses on experiential learning and self-reflection, rather than memorizing moral codes. Students are encouraged to engage in discussions of real-life moral situations, often based on historical stories or Confucian scriptures, to practice their ability to discern right from wrong and apply ethics to their lives. A lesson might start from analyzing a historical story of an official's honesty, and then expand to a discussion of how that value can be applied in contemporary social relationships. Teachers serve as moral role models, leading students by demonstrating integrity, humility, and compassion in everyday interactions. This approach not only democratizes morality, making it close to all walks of life, but also aligns with the communal values of ancient Chinese society, where individual ethics reinforce collective harmony. In the feudal context, this method has contributed to breaking down class barriers, encouraging people's participation in the process of moral learning, thereby promoting a more just society (Peters, 2022).

Moral education also extends to social relationships, teaching students how to behave in hierarchies with respect while challenging injustice. In a stratified feudal society, this meant empowering the disadvantaged through moral knowledge, which in turn promoted a more just society. This thought is not only theoretical but also practical, helping students form the ability to act ethically in real-life situations, such as handling social conflicts or contributing to the community. In the ancient context, moral education contributed to the reconstruction of social order, as Confucian scholars used knowledge to critique corruption and promote justice. Today, this ideology forecasts modern concerns, like civic education in polarized societies or the ethical use of technology, where technical skills without a moral compass can be harmful. In modern education, moral education in the Confucian spirit can be applied to teach students to consider morality when using artificial intelligence, avoiding negative consequences such as discrimination or spreading misinformation. The Confucian principle of moral education retains its value, reminding educators that true learning must equip students with the ability to act fairly in an interconnected world, thereby contributing to building a just and sustainable society (Nguyen et all., 2025).

Overall, moral education in Confucian philosophy is not only part of the educational system but also the core for shaping human personality. By combining theory with practice, the Confucian method created a comprehensive educational model, influencing the development of East Asian civilizations. In the

modern context, when education faces issues such as the decline of social morality and the pressure from technology, moral education in the Confucian spirit provides an effective solution, helping students not only gain knowledge but also become responsible citizens, contributing to the sustainable development of society. The combination of moral education and modern skills can help address challenges such as social inequality or environmental crises, thereby affirming the enduring value of Confucian philosophy in contemporary education.

3.3. The Blend of Knowledge and Personality in Confucian Educational Philosophy

Ancient Chinese philosophy of education, especially through Confucian thought, emphasized the blending of knowledge and personality, rejecting the division between mind and heart. Intellectual development, in the view of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, includes mastering the classics, science, and art through critical thinking and self-study. However, knowledge is always tied to moral requirements, ensuring that knowledge serves compassion rather than domination. Students are encouraged to participate in interdisciplinary research, literature to cultivate empathy, mathematics to practice logical thinking, and history to understand social responsibility, thereby forming a well-rounded intellect that clarifies ethical choices. This blend is not only a theoretical principle but also a practical model, helping Confucian education become a comprehensive system, orienting people not only to know but also to live ethically and responsibly to the community.

This blending is expressed through pedagogical strategies such as the "reflective" method, in which lessons are concluded with the application of ethics. A lesson in poetry might turn to a discussion of social justice, connecting aesthetic sensibility with advocating for justice. Teachers choose a wide range of texts, from Confucian classics to folktales, to nurture cultural pride in addition to universal values. These methods promote active learning, where students debate social issues, practicing both analytical and moral reasoning skills. In the ancient context, this approach contributed to building a class of intellectuals with personality, contributing to social stability.

Morally, this blending prevents intellectual arrogance, reminding the learner that knowledge without virtue is empty. Confucius warned of the dangers of "learning without thinking," that is, learning without moral consideration, while Xunzi emphasized that intellectual discipline must go hand in hand with moral discipline. In fact, assessments prioritize ethics essays over memorization exams, which assess reasoning abilities based on virtue. In a modern context, this model suggests the integration of ethics into technology education, preparing students to innovate responsibly. On a global scale, it counterbalances pragmatic education by calling for a holistic approach where knowledge and ethics support each other to create enlightened individuals capable of solving complex social problems.

3.4. Significance in Contemporary Education

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In the 21st century, ancient Chinese educational philosophy offers an insightful perspective to address modern educational challenges. As global education systems face the rapid development of technology, cultural globalization, and moral uncertainties, the principles of Confucianism, moral education, the blending of knowledge and personality, and the moral role of the educator, provide a template for building an inclusive and responsible education.

The emphasis on ethical education is especially relevant in the age of technology, when issues such as data privacy, abuse of artificial intelligence, and the spread of misinformation require ethical consideration. The integration of ethics into the educational curriculum, as proposed by Confucianism, helps students develop the ability to make responsible decisions when using technology. Classes in programming or artificial intelligence can integrate discussions about the social impact of technology, encouraging students to consider the ethical consequences of engineering initiatives. In Vietnam, where the pressure of exams often overwhelms moral development, the Confucian model suggests designing curricula that integrate lessons on ethics, compassion, and social responsibility into subjects such as literature, history, or science.

The role of the educator as a moral role model, as Confucius and Confucian thinkers emphasize, still holds value in building trust and respect in the modern classroom. In the context of the increasing popularity of online education, teachers need to demonstrate integrity and empathy through digital interactions, thereby inspiring students to act with responsibility and compassion. Confucian philosophy also supports the construction of inclusive learning environments that celebrate cultural heritage while embracing diversity. In Vietnam, this means integrating traditional values such as filial piety and community spirit into the modern curriculum, while equipping students with global skills such as critical thinking and digital skills.

Furthermore, the Confucian philosophy provides a vision of sustainable education where students are trained not only to achieve academic achievement but also to live meaningful lives and contribute to society. In the context of the environmental crisis, the Confucian idea of harmony between humans and nature can guide the development of educational programs on sustainable development, encouraging students to act responsibly with the environment.

4. Conclusion

Ancient Chinese philosophy of education, with its emphasis on moral education, the blending of knowledge and personality, and the moral role of the educator, brings a profound and practical system of thought to guide education in the 21st century. More than a historical philosophy, Confucian thought provides valuable lessons on how to build a comprehensive, harmonious, and responsible education. In a modern context, these principles can be applied to address challenges such as the ethical use of

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technology, the inclusive development of students, and the preservation of culture in a globalized world. This paper explores key aspects of ancient Chinese philosophy of education, from its historical background to its core principles and modern applications. In the future, the continued research and application of this philosophy can open up new directions to build a meaningful and sustainable education, not only in Vietnam but also around the world.

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