

## CONFUCIAN LEARNING AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

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*Abstract: In his lecture “The Rise of Asia’s Universities”, delivered at the Royal Society in London in 2010, Richard C. Levin, then President of Yale University, criticized higher education in Asian nations for being narrowly specialized and unimaginative, and for emphasizing rote learning. According to him, higher education in these nations should emulate the ‘world class universities’ as defined by a small group of elite British and American universities, and should borrow from the philosophy of liberal education as articulated by Cardinal Newman and practiced by American universities. His perspective does not take into account the rich insights of the Confucian view of adult learning as a process of intellectual and moral transformation that involves the personalization of what has been learnt and the building of a broad world view. The Confucian model and the model of liberal education are different views of learning set in different cultural contexts, and each has important elements from which the other can benefit. Higher education in China should also learn from its own cultural heritage instead of just unquestioningly emulating a model borrowed from the west.<sup>1</sup>*

### I. Richard C. Levin on Higher Education in Asia

In 2010, at the Royal Society in London, Richard C. Levin, then President of Yale University, delivered an address titled “The Rise of Asia’s Universities”. He severely criticized higher education in Asian nations, and urged that such nations should learn from the strongest British and American universities that, according to him, define the concept of ‘world class universities’. They should learn from the American model of undergraduate education, which exemplifies the philosophy of liberal education as articulated by Cardinal Newman; only then can they sustain economic growth and develop the scientific research and innovation that drive such growth.

This paper is a response to Levin’s address from a Confucian perspective. After laying out the details of his observations in this section, I will present the Confucian view of adult learning in section 2. In section 3, I return to Levin’s observations,

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier and much briefer version of this paper was presented at a symposium hosted by New Asia College on December 2, 2013, in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of its partnership with the Yale-China Association. A summary of that presentation was published in *New Asia Life Monthly* 41:4 (December, 2013): 24-27. Subsequently, an expanded version was presented to students at the University of Texas at St. Antonio, as part of my visit to the University as Brackenridge Residential Scholar on March 26-29, 2015. Another further expanded version was presented in a class on Confucius that I taught at the University of California, Berkeley, in fall 2015. I have also benefitted from comments by Doil Kim, Winnie H.C. Sung, and Zheng Zemian on an earlier draft of the paper.

showing how they fail to do justice to the rich insights on learning found within the Confucian tradition. The purpose is not to deny that higher education in China today has much room for improvement nor that the conception of liberal education has much to offer. The point, on which I will elaborate in section 4, is that it is important for higher education in China to also incorporate the rich insights on learning found within its own cultural heritage, instead of unquestioningly assuming the superiority of some model of higher education borrowed from the west.

Levin's criticisms of higher education in Asia are varied and severe. According to him, Asian higher education is "highly specialized" and lack "multidisciplinary breadth" (Levin, 2010: 10). Its pedagogy "relies heavily on rote learning", and "focuses on the mastery of content, not on the development of the capacity for independent and critical thinking", and their students are just "passive learners" (Ibid: 10-11). This contrasts with his observation that "examinations in top U.S. universities rarely call for a recitation of facts; they call upon students to solve problems they have not encountered before, or to analyze two sides of an argument and state their own position." (Ibid: 18) The Asian approaches to higher education make their students "narrow" and "unimaginative", and while they "may be highly functional for training line engineers and mid-level government officials", they are "less suited to educating elites for leadership and innovation." (Ibid: 11)

By contrast to his very negative portrayal of higher education in Asia, Levin claims that "the strongest British and American universities ... call forth worldwide admiration and respect ... Sitting atop the global leagues tables, these institutions set the standards that others at home and abroad seek to emulate; they define the concept of 'world-class university'." (Ibid: 2) In addition, he praised "the American model of undergraduate curriculum, which typically provides students with two years to explore a variety of subjects before choosing a single subject on which to concentrate during their final two years." (Ibid: 16) This model follows "the philosophy of liberal education ... articulated by Cardinal Newman," according to which "it is not subject-specific knowledge, but the ability to assimilate new information and solve problems (that) is the most important characteristic of a well-educated person." (Ibid: 16-17) What is needed in higher education is "a pedagogy that encourages students to be more than passive recipients of information; rather, they must learn to think for themselves, and learn to structure an argument and defend it, or modify it in the face of new information or valid criticism." (Ibid: 17)

Throughout his discussion, Levin stresses sustained economic growth as the purpose of higher education in Asia (Ibid: 3, 5, 7, 9, 11). Toward such end, "the emerging Asian nations" need to build "indigenous research capacity", given "the importance of university-based scientific research in driving economic growth." (Ibid: 8-9) And the students' "independence and creativity" is what is needed to "drive the innovation that will be necessary to sustain economic growth in the long

run.” (Ibid: 11) “But it takes more than research capacity alone to develop a nation. It takes well-educated citizens of broad perspective and dynamic entrepreneurs capable of independent and original thinking.” (Ibid: 10) And it is in the context of these developmental needs that he urges Asian nations to model their higher education on that of the so-called “world-class universities”.

Given the diversity of cultures and systems of higher education in Asia, any generalization with broad strokes will be prone to over-simplification and inaccuracies. Even when commenting on a single nation, hasty observations about superiority of the west without taking into account the nation’s own cultural heritage demonstrate a cultural insensitivity and narrowness of perspective. While it seems reasonable to urge that one looks to other models of higher education for insights as one seeks to improve on one’s own, it sounds overly self-confident to claim that there is one model – namely, one’s own – that should lead the world and that all other nations should emulate.

My paper will focus on the Confucian view of adult learning, an important part of China’s cultural heritage that has been influential on the academies (*shu yuan* 書院) of China for several hundred years and that still exerts its influence, albeit in a less conspicuous and pervasive manner, on higher education in the China region today. The Confucian view emphasizes key elements of adult learning that are absent from Levin’s account of what is important to higher education, and it also emphasizes goals of adult learning that differ from Levin’s emphasis on innovation and economic growth. The Confucian view and the model of liberal education are distinct perspectives on learning set in different cultural contexts. Each embodies important insights that can be shared across cultures, and it is a distortion to present one model as superior from which all other nations should learn.

## II. A Confucian View of Adult Learning

The modern Chinese term for “university” is *da xue* 大學, which is also the title of one of the Confucian classics included among the Four Books. *Xue* 學 is often translated as “learning”, while *da* 大, meaning “big” or “great”, likely refers to adults (*da ren* 大人) in this context. *Da xue* is the kind of learning suited for adults, as contrasted with the kind of learning suited for children, or *xiao xue* 小學, where *xiao* 小, meaning “small” or “little”, refers to children (*xiao zi* 小子). The transition to adulthood occurs around the mid-teens, when the child acquires a degree of reflectivity that allows the program of learning to shift in emphasis from just practice to reflective understanding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., *Zhuzi Yulei* 124-125.

*Xue*, the term usually translated as “learning”, has to do not just with knowledge and intellectual abilities, but also emphasizes the intellectual and moral transformation of the whole person through embodying what one has learnt. Take, for example, the Book of Songs (*Shijing* 詩經), an ancient collection of poems that were often sung in songs. To learn the Book of Songs, one does not just memorize and analyze the poems, but also acquires the ability to cite a poem in the appropriate context to make a moral or political point. More importantly, one embodies the lessons learnt from the poems, in a way that leads to a transformation of the whole person. Thus, for the Confucians, adult learning involves a process that ultimately leads to such a personal transformation, and the process involves at least four main components, none of which is touched on in Levin’s address.

The first and most important step in the learning process is engagement with the process itself. Confucius describes himself as setting his heart/mind on learning at the age of fifteen; here, “setting one’s heart/mind on” is a translation of *zhi* 志, a term with the connotation of firmly directing one’s heart/mind (*xin* 心) at a certain goal, in the way that one aims steadily at a target in archery.<sup>3</sup> This dedication to learning is also described in terms of a fondness for learning (*hao xue* 好學) in the *Analects*; only Confucius himself and Yan Yuan, whom Confucius regards as the most talented of his students, are described in such terms.<sup>4</sup> Such dedication is also described in other terms, such as a constant concern about lagging behind and about not being able to reach what one strives for in the learning process (*Analects* 8.17; cf. 7.19). For Confucius, the object of learning is Zhou culture, supposedly founded by the Duke of Zhou, and learning for him is a life-long process; when he starts running out of energy in his old age, he laments how he has stopped dreaming of the Duke of Zhou (*Ibid.* 7.5). Yan Yuan is also depicted in the *Analects* as being unable to stop himself in the learning process (*Ibid.* 9.11). Just as only Confucius and Yan Yuan are described in the *Analects* as being fond of learning, they are also the only two individuals described as being in a state of immersed contentment (*le* 樂), a state that involves one’s taking joy in the process and being unwilling to stop (*Ibid.*: 6.11, 7.16, 7.19). And Xunzi makes a similar point about the learning process, commenting that “learning continues until death and only then does it stop.” (*Xunzi* 1.4a-b)

What enables a student to have such a dedication to and engagement with the learning process is an aspiration whose realization depends on the learning process, as is the case with Confucius’s aspiration to restore, transmit, and personally embody Zhou culture. And it is usually around the mid-teens, the formative years of one’s life, when one’s aspirations in life are formed, providing the driving force for the rest of

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<sup>3</sup>*Analects* 2.4; Zhu Xi also emphasizes the importance of *zhi* in the learning process; see *Zhuzi Yulei* 134.

<sup>4</sup>*Analects* 5.28, 6.3, 11.7; the fondness for learning is emphasized in several other passages, including 1.14, 8.13, 17.8.

one's life. Such aspirations involve not just one's personal interest in the object of learning and pleasure in the process, but also a sense of one's working toward something larger than oneself, a perception of the learning process that one engages in as preparatory to one's eventually making a contribution to human community as a whole.<sup>5</sup> It is these aspirations that account for the passionate engagement with the learning process, so that one is psychologically invested and can persevere despite challenges and hardship.

The second aspect of the learning process is the personal embodiment of what has been learnt. For the Confucians, learning is not a matter of rote learning or a passive process of the kind that Levin describes. Admittedly, recitation is part of childhood learning, but once one transitions to adulthood and acquires the capacity at reflection, the learning process emphasizes reflective understanding to the point of a personal resonance with what has been learnt, as a result of which what has been learnt is retained without the need for memorization.

In the *Analects*, the point is put in terms of *si* 思, an activity of the heart/mind that involves its focusing and pondering on what has been learnt, turning it over in one's heart/mind to arrive at its fundamental meaning (*Analects* 2.15, 15.31). Zhu Xi makes a similar point in relation to the way to read a classic. It is through reading, pondering on what has been read, rereading, and doing this over and over again to the point when one is intimately familiar with (*shou* 熟) and gets the essential meaning (*jing* 精) of the text that one becomes one with its ideas (*Zhuzi Yulei* 170; cf. 167). Given the focus of attention required in the process, one will inevitably have to proceed slowly, reading small parts of the text one by one with concentration and without striving for quantity (Ibid: 165-6) One should not look simultaneously at parts that one has not yet read, but should do so for parts that one has already read in the past so as to relate the ideas in the different portions of the text; through this process, one comes to apprehend the fundamental meaning of and thereby retain what one has learnt without depending on memorization (Ibid: 165).

Because of the special relation we stand to what we have learnt through this process, Zhu Xi speaks of our personally experiencing (*ti yan* 體驗) them to make them personally relevant to ourselves (*qie ji* 切己) (Ibid: 165, 179, 181). By doing so, we come to personally recognize their validity (*ti ren* 體認), and our heart/mind and body can enter into what we have read (Ibid: 173, 176, 177, 179). With time, what have been learnt become a part of ourselves, and we become one with them (Ibid: 140, 145). Thus, on the Confucian view, learning is an active process that involves focus and reflective effort, with the goal of attaining a kind of understanding that is not merely conceptual but takes the form of personal apprehension and resonance. On this view, retention of what has been learnt derives from such personal apprehension

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<sup>5</sup>I am indebted to Winnie H.C. Sung for alerting me to the need to make explicit this point.

and resonance rather than from rote learning or memorization or other kinds of passive process.

The third aspect of the learning process is its breadth of scope and the building of one's overall perspective on that basis. While it is important to repeatedly go over and ponder on what one has learnt to personally resonate with it and recognize its validity, it is also important to learn broadly. The idea of breadth is conveyed through the term *bo* 博, and the idea of breadth of learning (*bo xue* 博學) is emphasized throughout the *Analects* (*Analects* 9.2, 19.6). In the *Xunzi*, it is conveyed through describing the learning process as one of constant accumulation (*ji* 積), in the way that earth accumulates to form a mountain or small streams accumulate to fill a river or sea (*Xunzi* 1.3a). But breadth of learning is not just a matter of learning many disconnected things; it should also involve bringing what one has learnt back to its key elements, the latter being conveyed through the term *yue* 約.<sup>6</sup> After all, breadth is not just a matter of summation. When *Xunzi* compares the learning process to reaching a high place to attain a breadth of vista (*bo jian* 博見), that breadth of vista is not just a matter of seeing many things, but a matter of having a broad and connected view of things (*Xunzi* 1.1b).

Confucius puts the point explicitly by saying he does not just learn many things, but has a single thread (*yi* 一) that strings or links (*guan* 貫) them all together (*Analects* 15.3). The term *guan* 貫, translated here as “string together” or “link together”, is often paired with the term *tong* 通, which has the connotation of breaking through barriers or penetrating things. In learning, one has to unravel the key elements of what has been learnt and string them together, in the way that one penetrates the midpoints of individual coins and string them together to create higher denominations. By doing so, what one has learnt inform one's overall perspective on the world and on the place of humans in it. The importance of this aspect of learning is particularly emphasized by *Xunzi*, who urges that one ponders over and enquires into what one has learnt to penetrate (*tong* 通) and string (*guan* 貫) them together so as to attain a oneness (*yi* 一) in one's perspective (*Xunzi* 1.6b). Zhu Xi endorses this view of *Xunzi*'s, adding that the ability to penetrate and string things together is not separate from one's becoming intimately familiar with (*shou* 熟) what one has learnt, a point he puts by saying that the term *guan* 貫 can be explicated in terms of the term *shou* 熟 (*Zhuzi Yulei* 169; cf. 164) This point echoes his idea, mentioned earlier in connection with the second aspect of the learning process, that as one focuses attention on one part of a text, one should also go back to parts that one has already read so as to relate the different portions.

What this means is that the second and the third aspects of the learning process are not unrelated. One's becoming intimately familiar with what one is focusing on in

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<sup>6</sup>*Analects* 6.27, 9.11, 12.15; cf. *Mencius* 4B:15.

the process, grasping its fundamental meaning and personally apprehending it, facilitates one's drawing appropriate connections between it and other things that one has already learnt, as it is often at a deeper level of understanding that the connections between different things are revealed. This is true as much of the connections between different parts of a text as it is of connections between the different moments of history; it is through such depth in understanding that we come to apprehend the overall perspective of the author of a text or the patterns that run through different historical moments of significance. Conversely, the more we are able to see such connections, the better we understand each of the things that are thereby connected, as we become able to view it in the broader context. By discerning an underlying unity among apparently unrelated things, we penetrate beneath the surface of each thing and see in each a significance that we do not discern in the thing considered in isolation. Furthermore, drawing such connections enables the building of an overall perspective that we come to have on such things, adding to the personal apprehension that we have of each individual thing. In this way, depth and breadth of understanding cannot be separated.

The fourth aspect of the learning process is the transformation of the person through learning. By penetrating and stringing together what one has learnt, one develops an overall perspective informed by a breadth of vision. The student does not just learn literature, history, and philosophy, but sees the connections running through them, thereby helping her articulate her view of the world and of the place of humans in it. And this is not just a matter of intellectual understanding, as she also becomes intimately familiar with what she has learnt, in such a way that she personally resonates with and recognizes the appeal of that overall world view. As a result, she is able to shape her aspirations and define her endeavors in life in this broader context; in this sense, what she has learnt becomes part of her person and shapes her overall directions in life. Thus, the four aspects of the learning process are intimately related. The second and third aspects together contribute to the overall world view that is part of the personal transformation emphasized by the fourth aspect, and this in turn enriches and enables the student to better articulate her aspirations in life, including the contributions to human community to which her life is directed, that is emphasized by the first aspect.

For the Confucians, learning involves not just an intellectual transformation of the person, but also a moral transformation. The student learns moral lessons from the Confucian program of study, and embodies and practices them. The *Analects* presents the learned person as someone transformed in character (*Analects* 1.7, 1.14). Xunzi also describes what has been learnt as entering the whole person, taking shape in one's activity and repose, eventually leading to a total moral transformation of the person (*Xunzi* 1.4b-5a) Thus, on the Confucian view, the purpose of higher education, or adult learning, is not just a matter of economic growth and the requisite research and innovation as emphasized by Levin, nor should its emphasis be just a matter of

multidisciplinary breadth as well as critical thinking and other intellectual skills. One of its main purposes is the kind of intellectual and moral transformation of the whole person just described, and it should include as its key components the shaping of aspirations, the penetrating and stringing together of as well as the personal resonance with what has been learnt. This conception of learning had been effectively implemented in the academies of the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644), provided the basis for the founding of New Asia College in 1949 after the communist takeover of the mainland, and continues to subtly influence higher education in parts of the China region.

### III. The Confucian View of Learning and the Model of Liberal Education

These four aspects of the Confucian view of learning are conspicuously absent from Levin's presentation of the model of liberal education, although those intimately involved in undergraduate education, including in the American context, would appreciate their importance. First, it is shared knowledge among educators that success in learning is very much a function of motivation and engagement, a function of the extent to which the student is psychologically invested in the learning process. One important task of university educators during the student's early years is to facilitate her self-discovery of where her talents and passion reside and her self-shaping of her aspirations in life. The exposure to a wide and diverse range of subjects in the first two years is not just for the purpose of "multidisciplinary breadth", but serves to open the student's mind to new possibilities and new areas of knowledge so that she can decide for herself what she wants to accomplish in life. The first and most important goal of a university education is to provide the student with an environment in which she can shape her aspirations and find her passion, so that she can settle on a direction of learning that she is engaged with and take pleasure in, and that she views as preparatory for accomplishments in life that make a contribution to the human community. Having been so inspired, her passion will stay with her and drive her future accomplishments in life, much as Confucius was inspired at the age of fifteen to learn and embody, restore and transmit Zhou culture, a passion that stayed with him till he ran out of energy in his old age. The student can then be psychologically invested in and passionately engaged with her overall education and her chosen areas of inquiry, seeing how these fit into an overall direction of life to which she is inspired, and be able to persevere despite challenges and hardship.

Such inspiration, of course, does not come just from classroom instruction, but also depends on individual mentoring and advising by faculty mentors and professional staff advisors. Students might come to the university with psychological constraints, whether due to limited perspective or perceived limitations. For example, many, because of family expectations and peer pressure, might have set their mind on certain professional subjects early on. While some of them do flourish in these chosen



subjects, there are others whose hearts are clearly not in what they do. Even if they do well academically, it is clear that their interests and passions lie elsewhere, though they themselves are not sure what that might be. And some students might have a clearer sense of which direction in life they want to pursue, but feel constrained due to perceived limitations because they have been told by friends and peers, or even by family, that certain goals are not realistic and beyond their reach. In either case, the drive and passion that are needed for success are missing, and it is the task of the university educator to provide them with guidance and with an environment that can inspire them to succeed.

These elements of teaching – inspiring the students by helping them discover for themselves their talents and passions and their larger goals in life, and facilitating their pursuit of their chosen directions in life free from psychological constraints – are key elements in the early stages of a university education. It is at this stage of their life that students form their aspirations that become the driving force for the rest of their lives. Bracketing his focus on Zhou culture, Confucius' emphasis on setting one's goals (*zhi* 志) in life at this age and on a passionate dedication to learning (*hao xue* 好學) that sustains learning as a life-long process is a reminder of the importance of this aspect of learning.

Second, the Confucian emphasis on the student's personally embodying what has been learnt goes well beyond the acquisition of knowledge and of the kind of intellectual skills that Levin focuses on. Levin thinks "the ability to assimilate new information and solve problems is the most important characteristic of a well-educated person." This he sees as a criticism of higher education in Asia, where pedagogy "relies heavily on rote learning", and "focuses on the mastery of content, not on the development of the capacity for independent and critical thinking", and where the students are just "passive learners." As a comment on the Confucian view of learning, this criticism is misguided. Admittedly, on the Confucian conception, there is an element of recitation in childhood learning. But once one transitions to adulthood and acquires the capacity at reflective understanding, the learning process emphasizes one's pondering and reflecting on what has been learnt to the point of intimate familiarity and personal apprehension, as a result of which what has been learnt is retained without the need for memorization. This is not a matter of "rote learning" nor is the students "passive learners". Instead, this involves a process by which the student actively engages with what has been learnt, pondering over it to figure out its fundamental meaning, staying very focused on the topic at hand while also relating it to what has been learnt previously to grasp its broader implications, until she personally resonates with it.

This process of personally embodying what has been learnt is quite different from the kind of intellectual skills that Levin emphasizes, such as "the capacity for independent and critical thinking", "the ability to assimilate new information and solve problems", and the ability "to think for themselves, and ... to structure an

argument and defend it, or modify it in the face of new information or valid criticism.” But it is a false dichotomy to think that a process of learning is either focused on such skills or just a matter of rote learning and passivity. What the Confucians emphasize is an *active* process that builds on the substance of what has been learnt, a process that emphasizes mastering the substance of what has been learnt through active reflection. This is neither a matter of passivity nor a matter of learning such skills as critical thinking and problem solving, which can supposedly be abstracted from the specific subject matters on which they are exercised. While Confucius emphasizes both learning (*xue* 學) and focused pondering (*si* 思) on what has been learnt, he also remarks that the latter without the former serves no useful purpose (*Analects* 2.15, 15.31). For the Confucians, the active component of the learning process comes not from intellectual skills that can be abstracted from specific subject matters, but from the focused pondering and reflection that take place in context.

These comments are not intended to imply that the kind of skills that Levin emphasizes are not important; higher education in the China region today could no doubt benefit from incorporating more of such skills in its pedagogy. The point is rather that development of such skills is just one way in which students can be actively engaged with the learning process, and contrary to Levin, acquiring such abstracted skills is not “the most important characteristic of a well-educated person”. The kind of pondering and reflection that the Confucians emphasize and that enable students to personally resonate with and embody what has been learnt is itself another way in which students can be actively engaged.

Indeed, what the Confucians emphasize in this connection is not too far removed from what educators in American universities have themselves highlighted. Consider, for example, the report on “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for American’s Research Universities”, commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and issued in 1998, a report that is often abbreviated the Boyer’s Report and that has been widely consulted by administrators in research universities in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> The mode of learning emphasized in the report is described as research-based or inquiry-based, one that focuses not on transmission and reception of knowledge but on, citing John Dewey, discovery guided by mentoring.<sup>8</sup> What the Confucians emphasize when speaking of personalizing what has been learnt is itself a matter of discovery – through pondering and reflecting on what has been learnt in a focused manner, students discover for themselves the fundamental meaning that lies behind what has been learnt and the connection to what has previously been learnt, thereby enabling the kind of personal resonance that the Confucians highlight.

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<sup>7</sup>The commission that undertook the study was named after Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who passed away while the study was in progress, and the report itself is often referred to as the Boyer’s Report.

<sup>8</sup>See section I on “Make Research-Based Learning the Standard”.

With regard to breadth of knowledge, the Boyer's Report emphasizes "interdisciplinary education" much like the way that Levin emphasizes "multidisciplinary breadth".<sup>9</sup> This relates to the third aspect of the Confucian view of learning, namely, its emphasis on breadth of learning and on establishing connections between and linking together what one has learnt broadly so as to build an overall perspective. This aspect of learning, as we noted, is not separate from the second aspect which emphasizes one's coming to personally resonate with what has been learnt – each aspect facilitates and is facilitated by the other.

Neither Levin's address nor the Boyer's Report highlight this aspect of learning when commenting on breadth of knowledge. Admittedly, the emphasis on multidisciplinary exposure can implicitly convey the idea that there are fruitful connections to be drawn between disciplines. But what the Boyer's Report emphasizes when it talks about "removing barriers to interdisciplinary education" is the removal of institutional barriers that comes with the segregation of areas of study into departments and programs, rather than the intellectual exercise of drawing connections and linking together different disciplinary approaches. And Levin, when praising "the American model ... which typically provides students with two years to explore a variety of subjects before choosing a single subject on which to concentrate during their final two years", speaks more of the multiplicity of what is learnt than the connections between them.

More importantly, the kind of breadth that the Confucians emphasize, and the kind of connections and linkage that they highlight, are not specifically about the relation between multiple disciplines. Even in present day American universities, the breadth that educators emphasize extends not just to cross-disciplinary inquiry, but also to broadened cultural exposure and international experience, which help expand the student's horizon in a way that hopefully would pre-empt the kind of restricted cultural perspective represented in Levin's address. For the Confucians, the breadth emphasized is not about the connections between disciplines; their emphasis on breadth predates the compartmentalization of intellectual inquiry into disciplines and institutionalization into departments and programs. The connections and linkage that they emphasize are about the relation between what one has learnt as such, whether this be different aspects of an area of inquiry or different parts of a text. They see drawing connections between and linking together different elements of what one has learnt as something that should be done at every step of the learning process; this is what makes the process one of constant and gradual accumulation of the kind that Xunzi describes.

This aspect of the Confucian view of learning shows that Levin's comment about how higher education in Asia is "highly specialized", "narrow", and lacking in "multidisciplinary breadth" do not hold true of the Confucian view, which actually

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<sup>9</sup>See section IV on "Remove Barriers to Interdisciplinary Education".

goes beyond Levin's presentation of the model of liberal education by emphasizing not just breadth but the kind of connections and linkage just described. The importance of the latter has been recognized by university administrators in the U.S. who oversee undergraduate education; a common concern is that just exposing students to different areas of study is not sufficient for breadth of knowledge. In public universities, which have limited resources and high student-to-faculty ratios, breadth requirements often take the form of requiring students to take courses from each of a number of broadly defined areas of study. This has often resulted in the phenomenon of 'checking-the-boxes'. But breadth, after all, is not mere summation. The person with a broad perspective is not just someone who sees many things, but someone who can see their inter-connections and draw the appropriate linkage. Along with these worries, some administrators have voiced a concern about the model that Levin describes, questioning whether exploring different areas of study in the lower division years is an effective way of developing in students the breadth that is sought. Perhaps it is only in the upper division years, after the students have settled on a major, that connections can be more easily found; at that point, the students can explore *outward* from their majors, venturing into fields of inquiry related to their majors under the guidance of their faculty mentors.

Although Levin does not touch on the importance of connecting different elements of what one has learnt, this is something that Cardinal Newman, whom he cites as his source when presenting the model of liberal education, does emphasize in his *The Idea of a University*. Commenting on the "enlargement of the mind," which for him is a key component of liberal education, Newman remarks that: "The enlargement consists, not merely in the passive reception into the mind of a number of ideas hitherto unknown to it, but in the mind's energetic and simultaneous action upon and towards and among those new ideas... It is the action of a formative power, reducing to order and meaning the matter of our acquirements; it is a making the objects of our knowledge subjectively our own... it is a digestion of what we receive, into the substance of our previous state of thought; and without this no enlargement is said to follow. There is no enlargement, unless there be a comparison of ideas one with another, as they come before the mind, and a systematizing of them. We feel our minds to be growing and expanding then, when we not only learn, but refer what we learn to what we know already." (Newman, 1927: 134) For him: "That only is true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." (Ibid: 136-7)

His comments on the mind's efforts to "digest what we receive" and to "make the objects of knowledge subjectively our own" mirror the second aspect of the Confucian view of learning, while his comments on the mind's efforts to "reduce to order and meaning", to "systematize", and to "view many things at once as one

whole” mirror the third aspect. Thus, contrary to Levin’s comment about passivity and unimaginativeness, the Confucian view of learning is an active process that is aligned with the model that Newman espouses.

Levin comments on the examination system in indirect criticism of higher education in Asia, observing that “examinations in top U.S. universities rarely call for a recitation of facts; they call upon students to solve problems they have not encountered before, or to analyze two sides of an argument and state their own position.” Again, his implied criticism fails to do justice to the Confucian view, on which the second and third aspects just highlighted are both active processes that together conduces to the kind of reflective understanding that enables the student to retain what has been learnt without deliberate efforts at memorization. Examinations should ideally be geared toward an assessment of such reflective understanding, and preparation for the examinations should involve the active processes just described. It is again a false dichotomy to present examinations as involving either a recitation of facts or the ability to solve problems and analyze arguments. There are active processes in learning other than problem solving or argumentation, and examinations are ideally a focal point to motivate students to engage in such active processes.

Fourth, these active processes together help the student develop her overall perspective on, and articulate her view of, the world and of the place of humans in it. They also facilitate her personally resonating with such a perspective and embodying such a world view, and this is the kind of intellectual transformation highlighted in the fourth aspect of the Confucian view of learning. The Confucian view also emphasizes a moral transformation of the student, though this aspect of learning is absent from Levin’s presentation of liberal education and from the Boyer’s report. Newman himself explicitly states that “the object of a University is intellectual, not moral” (Ibid. Preface, ix ) He is emphatic that the goal of a university education is knowledge for its own sake, not to make humans better (Ibid: 114, 120-1). Still, study of the liberal arts was viewed by the Greeks as helping to produce virtuous individuals and prepare them for civic life. To the extent that the more recent notion of liberal education is derived from the Greek conception of liberal arts, the moral dimension of learning should not be alien to it. Indeed, even in modern times, the Association of American Colleges and Universities describes liberal education as “a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement.”<sup>10</sup>

In recent decades, concerns have been raised as to whether there is something problematic about the idea of moral education, whether it might be tantamount to a form of indoctrination and whether it should not have a place in a pluralistic society. No cogent argument has yet been proffered to substantiate such concerns.<sup>11</sup> And if we

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<sup>10</sup>2016 web page of Association of American Colleges and Universities, section on “Liberal Education”.

<sup>11</sup>See Sher & Bennett for a discussion of this issue.

survey the portrayal of liberal arts education or liberal education by colleges in the U.S. that view themselves as adopting this model of education, the element of “values, ethics, and civic engagement” is often present even if it might have been lost in actual implementation due to practical limitations. For example, the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Berkeley, portrays a liberal arts education as emphasizing the “need to reflect on life, to distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice, and what is noble and beautiful from what is useful”, and describes the liberal arts curriculum as one that “provides the moral compass that the ancient Greeks sought and that we still strive for”.<sup>12</sup> The fourth aspect of the Confucian view of learning serves as a reminder of the importance of the moral dimension of teaching and learning.

Aside from not taking into account these four aspects of the learning process, Levin’s conception of the goals of higher education also differs from that of the Confucians and, indeed, from the way higher education is viewed in the Asian or American context. His focus is almost exclusively on the scientific research and innovation that drive economic growth. Even as an observation directed specifically at Asian nations, not inclusive of American higher education, such a conception of the goals of higher education is obviously too narrow, and not one that any serious educator in present day China would endorse. He does occasionally refer to leadership as a goal, criticizing higher education in Asia as “highly functional for training line engineers and mid-level government officials” and “less suited to educating elites for leadership and innovation”. But his comment goes against the very spirit of the Confucian view of learning; the four aspects we highlighted come together for the ultimate goal of educating students for moral, social and political leadership. The forming of life-long aspirations, backed by the development and personal embodiment of a broad world view as well as a deep ethical sense, shapes the student to become a person of broad vision and with a sense of mission to serve the public realm, and this is the kind of Confucian scholar-administrators who pervaded the history of China and moved the nation forward. Admittedly, we do need leaders in more specialized professions, such as science and technology, or business and economics, to advance the nation in more tangible and material ways. But this should not be the exclusive or primary goal of higher education. We also need leaders in other areas who can help drive advances in, for example, arts and humanistic studies, and more importantly, leaders who can help propel the nation forward morally, socially and politically. Levin’s depiction of the goals of higher education for Asian nations is, like his depiction of higher education in Asia, one-sided and fails to do justice to the aspirations, cultural heritage and internal resources of those who are more intimately concerned with and in touch with higher education in these nations.

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<sup>12</sup>2016 web page of the college, section on “A Liberal Arts Education”.

#### IV. A Different Story

My discussion of the Confucian view of learning, and my observation that Levin's address has ignored important elements of such a view, is not intended to deny that there is much room for improvement in higher education in the China region nor that it can benefit from certain elements of the model of liberal education. The point is rather that there are insights in its own cultural heritage that higher education in the China region can benefit from instead of just emulating a model borrowed from the west, and indeed higher education in the U.S. can also benefit from such insights. For example, higher education in the China region can benefit from the emphasis of liberal education on intellectual skills such as critical thinking, analytic and argumentative rigor, and problem solving. But overemphasizing such skills to the neglect of the other aspects of learning emphasized by the Confucians will undermine the transformative role of higher education, and higher education in the U.S. can itself benefit from incorporating more of these other aspects of learning, such as the importance of drawing connections between and linking different areas of study into an overarching world view, and personalizing it in a way that leads to an intellectual transformation of the person. The Confucian view of adult learning and the model of liberal education are distinct and different views of learning set in different cultural contexts, and sharing insights across cultures would work to their mutual benefit.

My discussion is also not intended to suggest that higher education in the China region fully exhibits the four aspects of the Confucian view described earlier. While some elements of such a view are undoubtedly present in some contexts, there has also been a tendency to move in directions detrimental to the future development of higher education. Take the situation in Hong Kong as an example. At a more individual level, there is in certain university contexts still a close personal relationship between teacher and individual students, with the former playing, and viewed by the latter as playing, the kind of inspirational role that the Confucians emphasize. And yet at the institutional level, there has been a tendency to emulate universities in the west, with the talk of emulating the so-called "world class universities" being quite prevalent in the past few decades. There has also been a tendency to import what are perceived as characteristics of such universities, though often interpreted and implemented in a way that causes fundamental distortions in the nature of higher education. For example, while organizational structures are put in place to mirror the academic governance structures in American universities, an additional layer of governance body in which academics play only a minor role is often placed above and with authority over the academic governance structure. As a result, political considerations and business interests often intrude into the university's academic processes, including academic appointments. As another example, the whole university system is overseen by a government funding agency that, through its funding process, influences the academic development of universities.

The agency emphasizes assessments of the universities' academic operations in terms of quantifiable outcomes that are intelligible to and can be measured by a non-academic audience. This outside-in model of assessment, with emphasis on such measures as research *outputs* and learning *outcomes*, is supposed to have been borrowed from the west, but its effect is to allow non-academic measures to drive and distort the academic operations of universities.

In an article published in 1952 explaining the name of New Asia College (*xin ya shu yuan* 新亞書院), which he co-founded with Qian Mu in Hong Kong in 1949 with the mission of preserving and promoting Chinese culture after the communist takeover of the mainland, Tang Junyi explains "New Asia" in terms of the rebirth of Asia, and specifically of China (Tang, 1952). He talks about the need of China, and of Asia generally, to revitalize itself after a long period of colonialization as well as military and technological domination by the west. In that article, he emphasizes that while we can learn from the west in certain areas such as science and technology, there are also rich resources within our own cultural tradition that we should build on. The danger is that we might look to the west and regard it as superior in a way that leads us to ignore our own cultural resources. A similar theme recurs in a paper published in 1961, in which he conveys his distress over the erosion of traditional values on the mainland, while also lamenting what he perceives as a failure of overseas Chinese to take their own cultural heritage seriously, such as by preferring to speak in a foreign language or by opting for a foreign way of life (Tang, 1961: 2-4). In a subsequent paper published in 1964, he concedes, in response to readers' comments on the earlier paper, that wherever one might reside, one could still "self-replant one's spiritual roots" (*zi zhi ling gen* 自植靈根) in the sense that one could still embody one's cultural values and aspirations in one's way of life, albeit in a foreign environment (Tang, 1964: 57-58). And he injects the hope that one could eventually be more respectful of one's own cultural heritage and take it seriously (*zi zun zi zhong* 自尊自重) if one could have confidence in and hold on to one's own cultural heritage (*zi xin zi shou* 自信自守) (Ibid: 53-56).

In his address, Levin has told a story about how higher education in Asia, including China, should evolve, namely, emulate universities of the west. What the brief summary of the situation in Hong Kong shows is that, at the institutional level, there are also pressures on universities in Hong Kong to move in that direction, though in a way that causes fundamental distortions in higher education. This illustrates how the phenomenon that Tang Junyi laments in his 1961 article is still present in higher education nowadays, namely, the tendency to take what is borrowed from the west as superior and to ignore and not take seriously the resources of one's own cultural heritage. What we need to do is to counter this tendency by seriously probing and treasuring the rich resources in our own cultural heritage, in our case the Confucian view of adult learning, instead of looking blindly to the west. We can still



learn from the model of liberal education, but we should at the same time also incorporate the insights of our own cultural heritage into the educational system. If we can do this, we would no longer hear the kind of story that Levin tells in his address to the Royal Society. Instead, we should be able to tell our own, and a different, story.

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