

# Confucian Communication Ethics in Media: A Short Introduction

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## 1. Introduction

Confucianism, the system of thought that has been variously described as a philosophy, a way of life, a worldview, a religion, a culture, and so on, is named after Kung Fu-tzu, or Kung the Master. Confucius was born in the sixth century BCE in the principality of Lu in the modern Shandong Province of China. The socio-religio-cultural worldview that is identified as Confucianism and has characterized the way of life of a large segment of people in Asia and beyond for the last several thousand years began with an intellectual who was convinced that he had a divine mission to re-establish the social order of his time. Although Confucius attempted for many years to propagate his teachings through official government channels, his efforts were often not justly rewarded. Nonetheless, Confucius never gave up on teaching his disciples and also spent the last years of his life editing the classics of China's past – all in the effort to provide a vision and way out of the state of social and political conflict due to human moral decline, especially among those in power.

Confucius' pedagogical regiment consisted of lessons in civics, literature, mathematics, history, music, propriety, divination, and sports. This represented a comprehensive and integrated method for human beings to transform themselves from the inner core, starting with the individual undertaking a self-effort that would contribute positively to the entire society, indeed the world. In terms of communication style, Confucius shared similarity with Socrates, preferring to engage his students with questions and carrying out conversations rather than giving lectures (Smith, 1991, p.174).

## 2. Confucian Ethical Worldview

Communication is not exclusive to human beings, but ethical human communication in the Confucian paradigm requires a process of personal self-cultivation and transformation in order to be imbued with qualities that characterize full self-realization. Through a proper education and consistent learning, the individual embodies the following essential qualities (Runes, 1983, p. 338): *Ren* (仁, benevolence, humaneness); *Yi* (义; 義, righteousness, justice); *Li* (礼; 禮, propriety, rites); *Zhi* (智, wisdom, knowledge); *Xin* (信, sincerity, faithfulness). Indeed, these qualities demonstrate the human awareness of being in relationship with others and the desire to act towards others virtuously as their dignity deserves. Whether in formal religious ceremonies or in mundane daily routines, actions must be carried out with precision and intention in accordance with each particular context. Confucius taught, “Do not look at what is contrary to *li*, do not listen to what is contrary to *li*, do not speak what is contrary to *li*, and do not make any movement that is contrary to *li*” (*Analects*, 12.1).

When one is imbued with these qualities, one is appropriately called a *Junzi* (君子) – the paradigmatic model of Confucian personality. The individual embodies the highest degree of moral excellence and free from any sign of depravity, ill-will, and pettiness. Translated variously as ‘superior person,’ ‘exemplary person,’ and ‘profound person,’ the *junzi* communicates the image of one who has received a proper education and has the ability to establish in oneself the unity of knowledge and action.

Indeed, education and character, in the Confucian paradigm, are not two separate aspects of a fully realized person, but are integrally connected to one another, supporting and informing one another. According to Confucius, a *junzi* has nine wishes (Nadeau, 2015, p. 45): 1) to have a clear vision; 2) to be able to listen well; 3) to have a gentle appearance; 4) to exhibit reverential expressions; 5) to be true to one’s word; 6) to be conscientious of one affairs; 7) to make inquiries when in doubt; 8) to regret having lost one’s temper; and 9) to consider carefully before attaining something (*Analects*, Ch. 10).

While Confucian self-transformation is first and foremost to achieve self-realization, to be authentically human is not simply about acquisition of knowledge and skills for selfish purposes. While self-cultivation takes the individual as the point of departure, the self is not an isolated entity; rather it exists within an interconnected and ever-expanding network of human relations – starting with the family and going towards the community, the world, and indeed the cosmos. According to Tu Weiming, “Self-realization as a communal act presupposes a personal commitment for harmonizing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. The full realization of personhood entails the real possibility of transcending selfishness, nepotism, parochialism, nationalism, and anthropocentrism” (Tu, nd, p. 79). Thus, authentic humanity in the Confucian understanding is never narcissistic and self-serving, but ever conscious of the four essential dimensions of the shared human experience—self, community, Earth (nature) and Heaven.

Authentic humanity in Confucianism calls for the integration of the body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit of the self. This integration results in actions and interactions that promote harmony at all levels – from the home to the world and beyond. A highly cultivated person while deeply rooted in his/her immediate context, is nevertheless able to enter into relationship with other human beings, with nature, and with the transcendent. An essential element of the Confucian vision is the commitment to relationship of mutuality with Heaven, whose way is distinct and superior to that of human beings. Thus, human beings must open their heart and mind to the Way of Heaven so that their thoughts and deeds are in harmony with the will of Heaven.

The culmination of the process of self-cultivation is the ability to envision oneself as part of an intrinsic whole and be able to shift one’s locus of concern to others rather than being focused on one’s selfish needs and desires. As Huston Smith remarks, “In shifting the center of one’s empathic concern from oneself to one’s family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism” (1991, p. 200). Indeed, the conscious move to the transcendent also overcomes egotistical anthropocentrism and be able to obtain what Tu Weiming calls an ‘anthropocosmic’ vision of reality (2013, p. 6).

Although Confucianism serves an all-encompassing role in the societies influenced by this worldview, it is usually not identified as a ‘religion’ by the people in these places. Religion, for many East Asians, is associated with institutional teaching or school of instruction, which is perceived as organizational and sectarian. Confucianism, on the other hand, is thoroughly diffused in the people’s lives, more like the air that East Asians breathe (Nadeau, 2014, p. 21). Even though certain aspects of Confucian thought and practices have been suppressed due to historical and political developments in the region, or judged as outdated and oppressive due to the rise in modernity and globalization, the Confucian worldview and its values still largely govern the way East Asians perceive themselves and relationship with others.

Many people in East Asian societies continue to perform family-oriented rituals rooted in Confucian teaching and making regular offerings to ancestors even if they do not explicitly identify themselves as Confucian. In Communist Vietnam, the government sanctions and organizes ceremonies annually to pay tribute to the legendary Hung kings who Vietnamese people consider to be their national ancestors. It is true that in East Asia, while students in the last century and a half no longer pore over Confucian classics and memorize sayings by the beloved sage, Confucianism remains very much a part of the social and spiritual fabric of East Asian societies as the ancient teachings get re-contextualized for the contemporary age.

### **3. Confucianism and the Media**

While Confucian teachings have always been communicated through literature and lived traditions throughout the centuries, in the modern age, another common way that Confucian values get transmitted are through movies and dramas. Many media scholars have attributed the success of Korean dramas as part of the ‘Hallyu’ Korean wave in East Asian markets to what has been labeled as ‘cultural proximity’ (Yang, 2008, p.109). Cultural proximity refers to the cultural resemblances that enable people from different countries to appreciate and receive what each has to offer. This theory has been offered as an explanation for the popularity of Korean dramas among the Chinese audience who can relate to the depiction of “Neo-Confucian social concepts...awakening a respect for traditional values lost under communism” (Y. Kim, 2007, p. 127).

As for Japan, cultural proximity refers to the new consciousness of the similarities between the Korean and Japanese cultures, with the latter once perceiving the former as being ‘backwards’ and ‘underdeveloped’ (Kim, Agrusa, and Lee, 2007, p.1351). However, by seeing Confucian aspects embedded in the Korean culture as depicted in the dramas, Japanese people began to see Koreans in a new light. Cultural proximity indeed has been a popular theory among media scholars to explain the success of the Hallyu wave that began in the early 2000s and continues to be a strong presence in the global pop culture. Certainly, in Vietnam and Taiwan, countries profoundly influenced by Confucianism and where Korean dramas are widely watched, Vietnamese and Taiwanese audience can easily connect with the cultural elements and social traditions portrayed in the plotlines.

While cultural proximity is the most accepted explanation for the popularity of Korean dramas in its neighboring countries, other explanations would need to be made for why Korean

dramas have managed to garner a large audience in countries where Confucianism is not the prevalent worldview, e.g., the United States and South Asian countries. No matter the reason, to this extent, the reach of the Korean wave means that Confucianism is then introduced to an entirely new audience in other parts of the world.

Although the depiction of the Confucian worldview and values in Asian dramas demonstrates the ongoing significance of Confucian thought in contemporary Asian society, one of the signifiers of the 'revival' of Confucianism in China itself is the production of the movie 'Confucius' in 2009 to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 2,560<sup>th</sup> birthday of Confucius himself. The movie, which starred Chow Yun-fat as the great master and philosopher, was released in January 2010, during the same time that the Hollywood blockbuster 'Avatar' was playing across China. Although the Hollywood production out-grossed 'Confucius' 2.5 times per day (Lafraniere, 2010), the fact that the movie was made at all was remarkable, considering that during the Cultural Revolution, Confucius' teachings were banned by Mao Zedong, who ordered his family home destroyed.

While the positive values of Confucianism have been portrayed in various communication genres, from literature to music, the controversial elements of Confucian social system have also been the subject of many artistic works, especially pertaining to the role of women in an hierarchical Confucian society. In Vietnamese society, the four virtues required of a married woman, consisting of work, manner, speech, and ethics remain deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the women who decide to enter matrimony and raise a family as well as the men who expect these virtues from their wives. Songs about mothers are regularly composed and continue to be popular even in the modern pop culture. At a karaoke party, anyone who chooses to sing a song about mother can guarantee to induce feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, and empathy from the listeners who are always ready to join in the chorus section.

In addition, the depiction of the struggles and suffering of women in loveless marriages arranged by parents, having to deal with dictatorial and demanding husbands who spend their drunken days playing chess and gambling is a staple in Vietnamese dramas and comedy. The 1993 critically acclaimed film by Tran Anh Hung, 'The Scent of Green Papaya,' for example, depicts the Vietnamese woman in the traditional stereotypes as a hardworking, patient, and kind person, who has to deal with a husband who only knows how to spend all the money she tries to save on his escapades. All she can do is to quietly accept her fate and suffering, just like countless other Vietnamese women throughout history.

Confronting this reality, Vietnamese find themselves torn between feeling distaste with such apparent inequality and injustice, at the same time admiration for the strength of Vietnamese women. Unfortunately, expressing admiration without the necessary critiques of the system can perpetuate an unjust model of the ideal wife and mother in Vietnamese society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, while Confucianism is academically categorized as a world religion, its organizational structure differs significantly from other religions, even Buddhism, which has

temples and sanghas that serve as the official face of institutional Buddhism. Thus, communication and transmission of Confucian thought and worldview over the centuries have been implemented primarily through formal education, traditional practices, social inculcation, and literature rather than through individuals affiliated with religious institutions as in the case of Christianity and Islam. In the modern age, Confucian values and practices have also been depicted in various media such as films, plays, television drama, and music. Through the ongoing portrayal of elements of Confucianism in modern media, this worldview continues to influence the way East Asians perceive and communicate about themselves. At the same time, it also facilitates opportunities for deeper critique about unjust elements embedded in Confucian thought and practices as well as creating opportunities for dialogue with other religious systems in matters relevant to the contemporary milieu.

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