

Is *Ertong Dujing* a Viable Form of Moral Education
for the 21st Century? A Philosophical Investigation
「兒童讀經」能成為二十一世紀可行之
道德教育嗎？：一哲學視角之探究[§]

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關鍵詞：兒童讀經、背誦、經典、孔子、《論語》、杜威、道德教育

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Abstract

The paper deals with a controversy over the current *ertong dujing* movement. *Ertong* (children) *dujing* (reciting the classics) refers to a grassroots educational movement in Taiwan and mainland China in which children recite the classical texts of Confucianism and Daoism in order to promote cultural values and cultivate moral character. The controversy centers on the legitimacy of recitation as a method of instruction and the value of classics in contemporary education. Although the controversy has somewhat subsided in academic circles, the practical question of how to integrate classical learning into a contemporary curriculum is still unresolved. This paper aims to explore the potential moral and educational value of the *ertong dujing* movement from a philosophical perspective by drawing on the teachings of Confucius in the *Analects* and also the works of John Dewey (1859-1952). The reason why I propose a hypothetical conversation with Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Dewey is that their thoughts about education have often been used to either support or denounce the *ertong dujing* movement. The purpose of the paper is not to take a stand or to finally settle the controversy, but to highlight both its prospects and challenges with respect to moral education. In light of the constant tensions between localization and globalization, between East and West, between educational theory and practice, we need to move beyond mere ideological disputes and examine the *ertong dujing* movement more deeply and thoroughly.

摘要

本文探討現今兒童讀經運動引發之爭議。兒童讀經是近年在臺灣和中國大陸興起的草根性教育運動，希望透由兒童背誦傳統儒家和道家的經典，以宣揚文化價值並促成品格發展。爭議主要在於背誦的合理性以及經典對當代教育的價值。雖然讀經在學界引發的這一波爭議已經退卻，但關於如何在當代課程中融入經典教育的實際性問題卻仍有待解決。本文以哲學的視角探究兒童讀經運動潛在的教育與道德意涵，並以孔子（551-479 BCE）及杜威（1859-1952）的相關教育學說為分析之重點。本文無意選定某個立場或企圖化解爭議，而是希望指出兒童讀經運動可能的前瞻發展與所面臨的挑戰。有鑑於全球化 vs. 本土化、東方 vs. 西方、教育理論 vs. 教育實踐之間的衝擊，我們必須揚棄任何表面的意識型態之爭，從更深入與宏觀的角度檢視問題。

The Controversy over *Ertong Dujing*

*Ertong*¹ (children) *dujing* (reciting the classics) refers to a grassroots educational movement in Taiwan and mainland China in which children recite the classical texts of Confucianism and Daoism² in order to promote cultural values and cultivate moral character. When the movement began in Taiwan in the 1980s, it was well received as a worthy supplement to the regular school curriculum. However, the movement aroused heated debates when introduced to mainland China in the early 2000s. Some see the recitation of memorized texts as nothing more than rote learning and criticize it for violating modern, progressive theories of education.³ Others praise the movement as an effective way to restore traditional Chinese culture and to reassert Chinese identity.⁴

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- 1 All transliterations of Chinese terms, organizations, and place names are in Hanyu Pinyin, with alternative transliterations placed in parenthesis on the first occurrence. The only exceptions are "Chiayi," "Taipei," and personal names used by the authors themselves.
 - 2 The most commonly used texts are the *Four Books*, including *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and *Mengzi* (孟子), and the *Dao De Jing* (道德經). Other texts used include the *Tangshi* (唐詩) and the *Xiaojing* (孝經).
 - 3 Liu Xiaodong 劉曉東, "Ping youer 'xuejing' [Comments on Children's Classics-Learning] 評幼兒「學經」," *Youer jiaoyu* 幼兒教育, 9 (2008), pp. 19-22; "Wenhua jiaoyu' he 'kexue jiaoyu' yao yong butong de jiaoyu fangshi ma: Jiu ertong dujing wenti yu Wang Caigui xiansheng shangque 「文化教育」和「科學教育」要用不同的教育方式嗎——就兒童讀經問題與王財貴先生商榷," *Jiaoyu zhuanke* 教育專刊 (June, 2005), pp. 31-33; "Youtong dujing jiushi 'mengyi yangcheng'? yu Guo Qijia xiansheng shangque [Can Children's Reciting Confucius Classics Foster Children's Moderation in Their Early Ages?] 兒童讀經就是「蒙以養正」? ——與郭齊家先生商榷," *Nanjing shida xuebao* [*Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Sciences)*] 南京師大學報(社會科學版), 6 (Nov., 2006), pp. 74-79. Also see Xiao Zongliu 蕭宗六, "Yaoqiu shaoer dujing shi ni chaoliu erdong [The Requirement for Children to Read the Classics Goes Against the Trend of the Time] 要求少兒讀經是逆潮流而動," *Jiaoyu xuebao* [*Journal of Educational Studies*] 教育學報, 3, 1 (Feb., 2007), pp. 76-78.
 - 4 Guo Qijia 郭齊家, "Yaoqiu qingshaer dujing shi shun chaoliu er dong [The Requirement for Children to Read Classics Is Abreast of the Times] 要求青少年讀經是順潮流而動," *Jiaoyu xuebao* [*Journal of Educational Studies*] 教育學報, 3, 2 (Apr., 2007), pp. 29-34; Liu Wei 劉偉, "Qianlun dujing dui qingshaonian ertong de yichu [Discuss the Benefits of Children's Reciting Chinese Ancient Classics] 淺論讀經對青少年兒童的益處," *Yuanning jiaoyu xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* [*Journal of Liaoning Educational Administration Institute*] 遼寧教育行政學院學報, 24, 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 76-78.

Overall, the controversy centers on the legitimacy of recitation as a method of instruction and the value of classics in contemporary education. Proponents of the *ertong dujing* movement regard memorization and recitation of Chinese classics to be highly suitable for young children because they have astute minds and easily remember anything they recite. In response to claims that classical texts are much too difficult for young children, supporters of the movement assert that as children mature they will gradually come to comprehend the meaning *for* themselves and *by* themselves. However, opponents also argue that these ancient texts contain outdated feudal ideas, gender-bias, and rigidly defined standards of behavior that tend to hinder critical and independent thinking, particularly if these texts are unquestionably revered as the final source of truth.

The idea of having children recite and memorize classical texts may seem unfamiliar, conservative, and even jarring to progressive educators in the 21st century. Nonetheless, for over two millennia *dujing* played a leading role in all levels of education in China, until it was abolished in 1905, the same year that the time-honored civil service examination system came to an end. School reformers at the time were so eager to have students learn modern school subjects, such as math and sciences, that they regarded these ancient texts as a hindrance to learning. Traditionalists strongly objected, but the modernists apparently won the day.

Looking back a century later, we find that modernization has brought about technological progress unprecedented in human history. However, such one-sided material progress has been unable to quench our perennial thirst for understanding about who we are and what we ought to be. Contemporary proponents of *ertong dujing* propose that this need can best be met by referring back to the traditional wisdom contained in ancient texts. Although the controversy over *ertong dujing* has somewhat subsided in Chinese educational circles, the question of how to integrate classical learning into a contemporary curriculum is still unresolved. Most importantly, the deeper question of how to

blend tradition into modernity is a daunting task. In light of the constant tensions between localization and globalization, between East and West, between educational theory and practice, we need to move beyond mere ideological disputes and examine the *ertong dujing* movement more deeply and thoroughly.

This paper aims to explore the potential moral and educational value of the *ertong dujing* movement from a philosophical perspective by drawing on the teachings of Confucius in the *Analects* and also the works of John Dewey (1859-1952). The reason why I propose a hypothetical conversation with Confucius and Dewey is that their thoughts about education have often been used to either support or denounce the *ertong dujing* movement. Although Confucius pointed out that poetry can engender noble aspirations and uplifting emotions, he also cautioned against the futility of mere recitation. Dewey, on the other hand, is more direct in his criticism of rote learning, but the question of whether Dewey would see *ertong dujing* simply as rote learning remains open to debate. Being pragmatically minded and culturally sensitive, in grappling with this question, Dewey would have raised a number of questions concerning the meaning, value, and effect of *ertong dujing* on both the individual child as well as the local community: Is *dujing* a purely cognitive, verbal activity, or does it also include kinesthetic and aesthetic elements? What sort of overall experience is created by participating in this communal practice? It is important to begin by clarifying what Dewey and Confucius themselves might have to say about this movement, so as to avoid misappropriating their ideas or falling prey to one-sided arguments.

The purpose of the paper is not to take a stand or to finally settle the controversy over the *ertong dujing* movement, but to highlight both its prospects and challenges with respect to moral education. It is important to bear in mind one caveat: Both Confucius and Dewey lived in different times than we do, and the problems they addressed were not quite the same as those facing us today; further, their works were never meant to serve as universal blueprints of education. My intention in drawing from their works is to show the complexity of

the problem at hand and to urge for a more nuanced exploration of the problem. Their works should not be expected to reveal final answers; it is we who have to make our own decisions.

What Might Confucius Say about *Ertong Dujing*?

Did Confucius think that students should learn the ancient classics and recite ancient poems and songs? The answer is affirmative. In the *Analects* Confucius asks his own son whether he had studied the songs in the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經). When his son replied that he had not, Confucius said, "If you do not study the songs, you will be at a loss as to what to say."⁵ In Confucius' time and for many centuries afterwards, engaging in learned or formal discussions required a high degree of familiarity with such poems. The poems in the *Shijing* were helpful and important not only on pragmatic grounds, but they were also the aesthetic expression of noble thoughts and genuine emotions.⁶ For Confucius, such poems were educational because they expressed emotions in a balanced way—"Pleasing without being excessive, mournful without being injurious."⁷ In putting forth his three-stage learning theory, Confucius exhorted his disciples to start with *shihjing* 詩 (poetry), acquire a firm standing through *li* 禮 (propriety), and complete the process with *yue* 樂 (music).⁸

In the *Analects* we find both Confucius and his disciples quoting lines from the *Shijing* as a way of crystallizing their thoughts and emotions. Finding a connection between the lines in the *Shijing* and their own experience in life added clarity and significance to their momentary experience. Confucius and his disciples endeavored to emulate the ancient sages; when they recited poetry

5 *Analects*, 16.13.

6 *Analects*, 2.2.

7 *Analects*, 3.20.

8 *Analects*, 8.8.

which resonated with their own thoughts or emotions, they were, in one sense, experiencing a form of communion with the ancients. Take Confucius' well-known disciple Master Zeng 曾子 (505-436BCE) as an example. When Master Zeng found himself seriously ill, he summoned his students to his bed and said, "Look at my feet! Look at my hands! The *Shijing* says, 'Fearful! trembling! As if peering over a deep abyss, as if walking across thin ice!' It is only from this moment hence that I have avoided desecration of my body, my young friends."⁹ In this anecdote Master Zeng used a quote from the *Shijing* to capture what he was thinking and feeling in the moment, at the same time uplifting his spirit and enriching the significance of his experience as he lay dying and thinking about his life-long responsibility to pass down the teachings of Confucius.

As expressions of the lived experience of the ancients in their pursuit of wisdom, the poems of the *Shijing* help to inspire uplifting emotions and to cultivate moral sensibilities. By thinking and feeling along with the imageries and associations created by the language of such poems, one experiences an aesthetic cleansing of thought and emotion.¹⁰ Confucius once summarized the benefits of studying and reciting the poems in the *Shijing* by stating that they arouse one's sensibilities, strengthen one's powers of observation, enhance one's ability to get on with others, and help one express emotions properly.¹¹ In short, in traditional Chinese culture such poetry was an important part of aesthetic and affective education.

Although Confucius encouraged the study of ancient poems and classics, he also warned against mere recitation of these texts, stating, "If people can recite all of the three hundred songs and yet, when given official responsibility, fail to

⁹ *Analects*, 8.3.

¹⁰ Peng Weijie 彭維杰, "Kongzi yu Zhuzi de shijiao sixiang bijiao—jian ji dui xiandai shige jiaoyu de qishi [A Comparative Study of Confucius and Zhu Xi's Poetic Education—Also on the Inspirations it Could have on the Educational Function of Contemporary Poetry] 孔子與朱子的詩教思想比較——兼及對現代詩歌教育的啟示," *Guowen xuezhì* [*Chinese Journal*] 國文學誌, 6 (2002), pp. 56-57.

¹¹ *Analects*, 17.9.

perform effectively, or when sent to distant quarters, are unable to act on their own initiative, then even though they have mastered so many of them, what good are they to them?"¹² From this quote we may infer that Confucius must have had some students who had memorized the words in the ancient texts but had not applied them in real life—a common problem not only in Confucius' time but also today. Memorization is easier than application. Nonetheless, application is what distinguishes a *junzi* 君子 (a morally exemplary person) from a bookish scholar.

To become a *junzi*, one must subordinate study (*xuewen* 學文) to maintaining high standards of everyday conduct, such as filial piety at home and showing deference in society.¹³ For Confucius, morality is a matter of doing, not a matter of knowing. Accordingly, two of Confucius' most erudite disciples, Ziyou 子游 (506BCE-?) and Zixia 子夏 (507BCE-?), known for their excellence in the study of culture,¹⁴ are in fact less renowned than Yanhui 顏回, (521-481BCE) who could go for several months without departing from *ren* 仁, whereas others could do so only sporadically.¹⁵ Interestingly, Yanhui was not the kind of student who raised many questions in class; Confucius once took this to be a sign of unthinking dullness. However, Yanhui later impressed his teacher with his ability to unite study and action.¹⁶

From the *Analects* we learn about both the strengths and limitations of ancient poems and classics for the education of a *junzi*. Even if the importance of studying the ancient classics is accepted, we still have to decide how early children should start, and in what way they should learn. We do not know whether Confucius himself encouraged very young children to learn ancient classics by heart. However, under the strong influence of Confucian thought,

12 *Analects*, 13.5.

13 *Analects*, 1.6.

14 *Analects*, 11.3.

15 *Analects*, 6.7.

16 *Analects*, 2.9.

dujing became the most common practice in the traditional Chinese system of education, and its educational value has been well appreciated by Confucian scholars in different dynasties.¹⁷

The Potential Value of the Contemporary *Ertong Dujing* Movement for Moral Education

Even if we do accept the value of reciting the classics, we are still left with the question of how to teach them to the next generation. Most people see the contemporary *ertong dujing* movement as a return to tradition. In my view, however, it is more of an innovation. Professor Wang Caigui 王財貴, who first initiated the movement, frequently illustrates the suitability of young children memorizing the classics with the simile of feeding a cow (*tianniu* 填牛), as opposed to stuffing a duck (*tianya* 填鴨). As Wang explains it, since a cow has a big stomach it can take in and store a huge amount of food at one time, and then slowly digest it later on. Similarly, a young child's mind can absorb large amounts of new information, even though the child does not immediately understand the meaning. However, in Wang's view, as they gain more experience in life, children gradually come to comprehend the meaning of the texts they memorized and recited at a young age.

This idea is encapsulated in the adage "After reciting a text one thousand times, the meaning spontaneously appears" (讀經千遍，其義自現). This way of learning can be seen as a form of tacit knowing,¹⁸ whereby a child first learns a text by heart, such that it becomes a kind of mental construct. Their tacit

17 Huang Chien-fang 黃千芳: "Redu beitung zai ertong dujing zhong de yiyi tanjiu [The Significance of Recitation Practice from Reading Classics in Childhood—A Viewpoint of Tacit Knowledge] 熟讀背誦在兒童讀經中的意義探究——一個默會知識的觀點," unpublished M.A. thesis (Nanhua University, 2010).

18 Ibid. In this thesis on *ertong dujing*, Huang applies Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing in arguing that *ertong dujing* can contribute to children's tacit knowledge of classical texts.

knowledge of the texts then paves the way for continuous exploration of its meaning as they get older. In other words, when memorizing a text, children do not fully comprehend the meaning, but they at least acquire the language in its tacit form.

Professor Wang Caigui's "cow-feeding" theory has been made the subject of a number of empirical studies in Taiwan attempting to find out whether memorized texts actually become food for thought when children turn into adolescents. Chang Ya-hsun found that children who recited the classics for a few years during childhood tended to recall a passage or two from these classical texts when they later encountered a life situation that captured the meaning of the memorized passages.¹⁹

In Chang's study, one participant recalled "taking action only after thinking it over three times" (三思而後行).²⁰ When he found himself lacking courage to persevere through a difficult situation in life, he thought of Confucius' words and felt inspired and energized: "As in piling up earth to erect a mountain, if, only one basketful short of completion, I stop, I have stopped. As in filling a ditch to level the ground, if, having dumped in only one basketful, I continue, I am progressing" (譬如爲山，未成一簣，止，吾止也；譬如平地，雖覆一簣，進，吾往也).²¹

Interestingly, many of the adolescents interviewed in Chang's study reported that they later came to appreciate the value of *ertong dujing*, even though they admitted to disliking it when they were children because they felt reluctant to sacrifice their leisure time for such activities. One adolescent commented that in addition to serving as a reminder of the importance of upholding high moral

19 Chang Ya-hsun 張雅曠: "Youji langlang dushu sheng [Remembering Those Chant—On How Reading Classics in Childhood Affects Teenagers' Moral Characters] 猶記琅琅讀書聲," unpublished M.A. thesis (Ming Chuan University, 2008).

20 *Analects*, 5.20.

21 *Analects*, 9.19.

standards, learning classical texts as a child later on helped him to understand certain concepts holistically.²²

Such findings demonstrate that *ertong dujing* can help children develop a sense of moral literacy. Since language orients our thoughts, and our thoughts influence our actions, this moral language readily serves to invoke an internal dialogue within the moral agent about what to think and do. Such a dialogue is important in that it helps us avoid impulsive acts and habitual modes of action. More importantly, it helps us reflect both *before* and *after* we act—to see, to project, and to interpret ourselves in a different light, imagining ourselves as embarking on the same journey as the sages of old—struggling and rejoicing along the way, just as they did.

Furthermore, *ertong dujing* can be extremely valuable in engendering in children positive emotions about virtue (as represented by the image of the *junzi* in the pursuit of *ren*). By inculcating positive emotions about virtue, children get in the habit of striving for moral excellence.

For example, children who frequently come across sayings about the *junzi* are more likely to become favorably disposed to this concept, since the Confucian classics teach that the *junzi* is someone who is "neither worried nor apprehensive";²³ someone who "helps to bring about the best in others";²⁴ and someone who "is distinguished but not arrogant."²⁵ Children who often hear about the contrast between the *junzi* and the *xiaoren* 小人 (petty person) will learn to distinguish the two, emulating the former and avoiding being like the latter. The *Analects* present the *junzi* as an exemplary person: the *junzi* seeks harmony, not conformity, whereas the *xiaoren* seek conformity, not harmony;²⁶ the *junzi* makes demands on himself, while the *xiaoren* makes demands on

22 Chang Ya-hsun: "Youji langlang dushu sheng," p. 70.

23 *Analects*, 12.4.

24 *Analects*, 12.16.

25 *Analects*, 13.26.

26 *Analects*, 13.23.

others;²⁷ the *junzi* understands what is appropriate, whereas the *xiaoren* apprehends what is of personal advantage.²⁸ In other words, when reciting these passages in the *Analects*, children absorb a positive image of a *junzi* and gain an instinctive appreciation of the *junzi* as being morally praiseworthy.

Nonetheless, *dujing* educators are faced with the challenging task of not only helping children develop this moral language, but also helping them to internalize it and imbue the language with genuine, positive emotions that build their personal character. The question of whether this can come about through mere recitation will be addressed later in this paper.

In the following section, I will address a few criticisms launched at the *ertong dujing* movement by advocates of progressive education and clarify what Dewey might have to say about *ertong dujing*. But first let me take a little detour and review the brief history of Dewey's debate with Robert Hutchins (1899-1977) on the value of the great books, as this has a bearing on the issue at hand.

Revisiting the Dewey-Hutchins Debate on the *Great Books*

Hutchins argued that the works of Plato (427-347BCE), Aristotle (384-322BCE), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) contained perennial truths for all times and cultures and should form the cornerstone of a university's liberal education. Dewey, on the other hand, regarded these texts as remnants of the past and was doubtful of their practical value for dealing with contemporary problems.

Upon closer examination, their polemical exchanges reflect deeper disagreements over fundamental, metaphysical questions: whether there was a

27 *Analects*, 15.21.

28 *Analects*, 4.16.

fixed, unchanging human nature; whether there are absolute truths; whether "reason" is the goal of education, and how it should be defined and taught. Hutchins advocated his particular version of liberal education and lamented the trend toward pragmatic, vocational education. Dewey repudiated Hutchins' elitist conception of "the nature of intellectuality" and his "belief in the existence of fixed and eternal authoritative principles as truths that are not to be questioned".²⁹ Hutchin's presentation of classical texts as authoritative, perennial truths was problematic for Dewey. As William Shea (1907-1991) notes, Dewey was concerned that a canon of books would "suppress questions, obviate criticism and set limit to vision."³⁰

Although Dewey was by no means against "the classical tradition," he usually linked the idea of tradition to words such as dogma, authority, obedience, and routine. In his *Encyclopedia of Education*, he defined the meaning of "tradition" by saying that "tradition denotes both a process and a thing."³¹ "As a noun," tradition "designates a doctrine which is currently accepted in a community and which is handed on from generation to generation, being accepted on the authority of its past currency rather than because of any independent examination and verification." Dewey then explained what tradition meant as a process. He wrote, "As a process, tradition has a wider meaning, being used to cover the entire operation of transmission by which a society maintains the continuity of its intellectual and moral life." Dewey also added a final remark: "As a fact, tradition has of course always been operative."³² Nonetheless, the question of how to make tradition operate more intelligently and less blindly is still unresolved.

29 John Dewey, LW 11, p. 398. All references to Dewey's works are from Larry A. Hickman (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, Electronic Edition (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1996). EW, MW, and LW are abbreviations for *The Early Works, 1881-1898* (5 volumes); *The Middle Works, 1899-1924* (15 volumes); and *The Later Works, 1925-1953* (17 volumes). For example, "LW 11, p. 398" refers to *The Later Works*, Volume 11, page 398.

30 William M. Shea, "John Dewey and the Crisis of the Canon," *American Journal of Education*, 97, 3 (May, 1989), p. 294. DOI: 10.1086/443928.

31 John Dewey, MW 7, p. 357.

32 Ibid.

In his *Experience and Education*, in which he sought to clarify the tensions between traditional education and progressive education, Dewey threw the problem back to his readers:

We have the problem of ascertaining how acquaintance with the past may be translated into a potent instrumentality for dealing with the future. We may reject knowledge of the past as the *end* of education and thereby only emphasize its importance as a *means*. When we do that we have a problem that is new in the story of education: How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?³³

Dewey diagnosed the problem well, but did not provide any concrete solutions. One thing, however, is clear: Dewey would not endorse any attempt to simply discard tradition altogether. The study of tradition still occupies an important place in Dewey's theory of education. What concerned him the most is that studying the past should help us appreciate the living present and to make our present life better.

Dewey's view about the potential contribution of the past to the present can be compared to that of Confucius. Although Confucius extolled the wisdom of the ancient sages and humbly claimed that he was merely a transmitter, and not an innovator, he is not to be mistaken as an advocate of "tradition for tradition's sake." As Confucius said, "Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher" (溫故而知新，可以為師矣).³⁴ Confucius regarded a teacher as someone who could, to appropriate Dewey's language, "translate" his knowledge of the past into a form suitable for the living present. On the other hand, those who simply study the past and imitate it

33 John Dewey, LW 13, p. 9.

34 *Analects*, 2.11.

unreflectively are not good teachers, however well read they may be. The new, however, does not come from a vacuum; it grows from the old. This is why Confucius said, "I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients" (述而不作，信而好古).³⁵ Confucius cherished the *dao* 道 the ancients exemplified; and he saw his task as a teacher as "broadening the way (*dao*)" (宏道).³⁶

In my view, we cannot reach our fullest potential without knowing the lived past. Developing an understanding of tradition through the study of classical texts can help us understand what traditional forces are shaping our contemporary lives. This can also help us determine which parts of the tradition to reconstruct, broaden, or discard. Yet, neither Dewey nor Hutchins provided fully sufficient answers about how to study traditional classics intelligently. This brief recount of the Dewey-Hutchins debate reveals that their discussions still leave us with many open-ended questions. It is time to revisit this question in light of the *ertong dujing* controversy.

What Might Dewey Say about *Ertong Dujing*?

As I noted earlier, Dewey's progressive ideas about education have often been used to condemn the *ertong dujing* movement. Indeed, progressive ideas about education have become the conventional wisdom of modern education—"The child must be active not passive; learning occurs best through play in early years; new knowledge must be connected with what children already know and thus will initially be concerned with the local, the concrete and the simple; learning should be pleasurable not forced."³⁷ The progressive tenet that

³⁵ *Analects*, 7.7.

³⁶ *Analects*, 15.29.

³⁷ Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 42.

memorization of facts is useless has led to a persisting ambivalence about the place of memorization in education.

At first glance, these progressive ideas seem to run into direct conflict with the beliefs held by the *ertong dujing* supporters. Upon closer examination, however, they may not be so incompatible. First of all, *dujing* activities do take into account the child's natural propensities. Recitation practice suits children's innate predilection and fondness for reciting anything with rhyme. In fact, the meaning is not important to young children; it's the rhythm and rhyming that matters. Moreover, as Kieran Egan points out in *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*, "Rhymes, rhythm and pattern are potent tools for giving meaningful, memorable, and attractive shape to any content. Their roles in learning are enormous, and their power to engage the imagination in learning the rhythms and patterns of language—and the underlying emotions that they reflect—is enormous."³⁸

Egan also notes that binary opposites are the most basic and powerful tools for organizing and categorizing knowledge. We see such opposites in conflict in nearly all stories. They are crucial in providing an initial ordering to many complex forms of knowledge. The most powerfully engaging opposites—like good/bad, security/fear, competition/cooperation—are emotionally charged, and when attached to content, imaginatively engaging. Rhymes, rhythms, and pattern on the one hand, and binary opposites on the other, all serve to engage children affectively and imaginatively.

According to Kang Jingping,³⁹ the language of the *Analects* is filled with aesthetic qualities—vivid descriptions of a person's facial expressions and

38 Kieran Egan, *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 3.

39 Kang Jingping 康錦屏, "Lun Lunyu yuyan de meigan xiaoying [On the Aesthetic Effect of the Language in *The Analects of Confucius*] 論《論語》語言的美感效應," *Beijing jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Beijing Institute of Education] 北京教育學院學報, 21, 4 (Dec., 2007), pp. 22-28.

actions; eloquent use of dialogue, analogy and imagery; and frequent use of verbal exclamation. Consequently, the recitation of such texts is more affective and aesthetic than it is cognitive and intellectual.

In addition, *dujing* can also be seen as an active, kinesthetic activity, for teachers have the children move their hands with the words or clap their hands together with the rhythms. In short, if well informed, Dewey would have rejected the accusation that *dujing* is merely rote learning.

Dewey's reactions against memorization and rote learning should be judged against the backdrop of the social and cultural conditions of the early part of the 20th century, and should not be applied to every situation in every society or culture. As Dewey stated in *Democracy and Education*, "That education is a social function, securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong, is to say in effect that education will vary with the quality of life which prevails in a group."⁴⁰ To meet this social function, the actual form of education will vary with different societal demands and cultural needs. I believe that Dewey would be open to consider different possibilities.

I think Dewey would want to look into the overall experience that *dujing* creates for children, rather than looking at it from a single, narrow dimension. In fact, we will be doing injustice to Dewey if we reduce his philosophy of education to that of a mere criticism against rote learning (anyone can criticize rote learning and yet not make himself a renowned philosopher of education). We should consider the major thrust of Dewey's vision about education: that education should contribute to a democratic way of life that is inherently moral. A democratic way of life is impossible without the community as a foundation.

40 John Dewey, MW 9, p. 87.

I contend that the *ertong dujing* movement helps to pave the way for the creation of such a community. In Chapter One of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote:

Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements.⁴¹

Dujing activities can engender in young children the "like-mindedness" and "emotional and intellectual dispositions" necessary for the creation and continuity of a Chinese community. For example, *dujing* helps to instill filial piety. The actual requirements of filial piety may change with different circumstances and times, but it remains a distinctive value of a Chinese, Confucian community. The shared emotional and intellectual dispositions surrounding the idea of filial piety instills a sense of solidarity in the community and helps its members to communicate and exchange viewpoints based on their mutual participation in this shared foundation.

Dujing activities can also help to establish a tighter bond between parents and their children, because they both participate in the same activities (usually the parents sit beside their children and recite along with them). Because of this intimate bond between parents and children at home, and by extension, between

41 John Dewey, *MW* 9, p. 7.

the young and the old in the community, we are more likely to reconstruct the shared tradition—rather than breaking with it—when it needs to be changed.

Dewey often said that one of the biggest challenges we face is to artfully integrate the old and the new. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey claimed that "interpenetration of the old and the new" characterizes every work of art and is the very essence of an aesthetic experience.⁴² Therefore, if the younger generation does not use the classics to understand the past and tradition, how can they deal with the apparent clash between the old and the new; how can they artfully integrate these two competing forces? If unwanted tradition has a hold on us and makes us blind and dogmatic, the solution is not to ignore it or to entirely discard it, but to reconstruct it to meet our purposes and address our problems.

These are some of the reasons why Dewey would have approved of the educational value of *ertong dujing*, but I think Dewey would still have his doubts. Regarding the purpose of developing moral character through *ertong dujing*, Dewey might offer some cautions, particularly with respect to the need to guard against the formation of customary morality. In his *Ethics*, Dewey distinguished between two kinds of morality: customary and reflective. Customary morality "places the standard and rules of conduct in ancestral habit"; reflective morality "appeals to conscience, reason, or to some principle which includes thought."⁴³ In Dewey's view, moral reflection "cannot emerge when there is a positive belief as to what is right and what is wrong." Reflection emerges when we are "confronted with situations in which different desires promise opposed goods and in which incompatible courses of action seem to be morally justified." Dewey added that "only such a conflict of good ends and of standards and rules of right and wrong calls forth personal inquiry into the bases of morals."⁴⁴

42 John Dewey, LW 10, p. 174.

43 John Dewey, LW 7, p. 162.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

In his *Ethics*, Dewey advocated a transition from customary to reflective morality and a shift of emphasis from "conformity to prevailing modes of action over to personal disposition and attitudes."⁴⁵ Only in this way can external moral conduct strengthen internal moral character. As Dewey contended, "The doer of the moral deed must have a certain state of mind in doing it. First, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose it, and choose it for itself; and thirdly, the act must be the expression of a formed and stable character."⁴⁶ For Dewey, a morally conscientious person should strive to reflect on morals as often as possible. "Customary morality tends to neglect or blur the connection between character and action; the essence of reflective morals is that it is conscious of the existence of a persistent self and of the part it plays in what is externally done."⁴⁷ The act of choosing itself reflects one's character. In other words, a stable moral character and a persistent moral self should be the goals of moral education.

Although we are not sure whether children and adolescents who practice *dujing* tend to develop customary morality more than others, or whether customary morality is a common problem for all, we should take Dewey's caution seriously. What is of immediate importance is the implication that these classical texts should not be presented to children as if they were the final word on everything that matters most in life. Rather, they should be presented in a way that encourages children to engage with the texts as potentially valuable resources for dealing with morally charged situations in life.

Dewey and Confucius on the Problem of Customary Morality

I think Confucius would also agree with Dewey's criticism of customary morality—of treating morality as a matter of conforming to fixed moral rules

45 Ibid., p. 166.

46 Ibid., p. 167.

47 Ibid., p. 172.

without exercising judgment. If one reads the *Analects* carefully, one would notice Confucius' caution against one-sided conformity to moral rules.

For example, Zaiwo 宰我 (522-458BCE) once asked Confucius a very interesting question: If an adherent of *ren* 仁 were informed that someone had fallen into a well, should he go in after him? Confucius replied: "How could this be? A *junzi* can be sent to save him, but would not jump in after him; he can be deceived, but not duped" (君子可逝也，不可陷也；可欺也，不可罔也).⁴⁸ In this passage Zaiwo presents a moral dilemma to find out whether a *junzi* is someone who abides by the principle of *ren* unreflectively, without considering whether it is wise to do so. In Confucius' answer, we learn that the principle of *ren* should be tempered with *zhi* 知 / 智 to determine the most appropriate course of action in a given situation. In other words, *ren* is not an absolute, all-encompassing value.

On another occasion,⁴⁹ Confucius asked Zilu 子路 (542-480BCE) if he had heard that if one is not careful with learning, the six undesirable qualities of character (*ren* 仁, *zhi* 知, *xin* 信, *zhi* 直, *yong* 勇, *gang* 剛) could degenerate into the six undesirable qualities of character (*yu* 愚, *dang* 蕩, *zei* 賊, *jiao* 絞, *luan* 亂, *kuang* 狂). When Zilu replied that he had not, Confucius answered:

Love of *ren* without love of learning degenerates into silliness. Love of *zhi* without love of learning degenerates into utter lack of principle. Love of *xin* without love of learning degenerates into villainy. Love of *zhi* without love of learning degenerates into harshness. Love of *yong* without love of learning degenerates into turbulence. Love of *gang* without love of learning degenerates into mere recklessness.

⁴⁸ *Analects*, 6.26.

⁴⁹ *Analects*, 17.8 (translation mine).

好仁不好學，其蔽也愚；好知不好學，其蔽也蕩；好信不好學，其蔽也賊；好直不好學，其蔽也絞；好勇不好學，其蔽也亂；好剛不好學，其蔽也狂。

Ren (being humane), *zhi* (being intelligent), *xin* (keeping promises), *zhi* (being upright), *yong* (having courage), and *gang* (being firm) are all desirable qualities of character in themselves; however, when people conform to them too one-sidedly and rigidly, without careful learning and reflection, it can lead to untoward consequences. Like Dewey, Confucius expected his disciples to develop the kind of reflective morality necessary for good judgment and to find a good balance between the demands of different virtues.

We still need to ask: How does one help students move away from customary morality to reflective morality? How can we ensure that children and adolescents practicing *dujing* do not fall into servile conformity to traditional rules of morality? How can we help students perceive the moral life as invigorating, as something imbued with the kind of freedom, flexibility, and spontaneity that Dewey and Confucius themselves exemplified? An easy way out is to simply claim that moral wisdom at the highest level is not something that can be taught, but is rather something which can only come about through constant practice. Perhaps Socrates (470-399BCE) was right that virtue cannot be taught, granted that his conversation with Meno was sincere.

Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, *ertong dujing* educators are faced with a difficult task in their efforts to make it a truly viable form of moral education for the 21st century. If *dujing* is to provide children with a moral language for life, it will take more than mere recitation. Recitation is only a foundation, albeit an important one. Instead

of leaving children comfortably on that basic foundation, we should help them develop and sustain this moral language, and have them internalize it, so that this language becomes imbued with genuine, positive emotions that will eventually transform their character. We should also help children use this language reflectively and flexibly enough to avoid moral dogmatism. This will not happen with mere recitation, so I would like to end this preliminary philosophical investigation with a call for more research that can provide us with further insight into this important vision of moral education.♦

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