The Summit of a Moral Pilgrimage: Classical Confucianism on Meaningful Ageing and Social Eldercare

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Medicine as Moral Practice
Caregiving as Moral Experience
Aotearoa/New Zealand: “The land of the long white cloud”
Shiwai Taoyuan 世外桃源

- Lake Wanaka & Mt Aspiring/Tititea, a view from the Roys Peak (March 2015)

- 水遠, 雪山外海水尤遠, 天更遠
Some Bioethical Research Projects

- Japan’s wartime medical atrocities and their international aftermath
- Abortion: Chinese views and experience
- China’s birth control program
- Medical professionalism in China
- Chinese crisis of patient-physician trust
- Social and ethical issues of HIV cure research
- Confucianism and bioethics
- Classical Confucianism and elderly care
- Eugenics and human genome editing in China within a global context
- Ethics of enhancing global biosafety
The Poverty of Global Bioethics: A Radical Critique

- Three Malaises of Contemporary Global Bioethics
  - **Rootless**
    - Focusing on general ethical dilemmas and principles, overlooking the broader socio-cultural forces shaping bioethical issues and responses to them, as well as the richness of individual moral experience
    - Focusing upon the ethical matters arising mostly from the Western context, overlooking those issues concerning large populations in the non-Western and less developed world as well as the relevance of indigenous moral traditions there
  - **Emotionless or Heartless**
    - Focusing upon reason and rationality; overlooking the fundamental roles of subjectivity, emotions, feelings and irrationality in human moral life
  - **Soulless**
    - Focusing upon body and mind; overlooking the existential and spiritual issues

- Beyond Bioethics
  - Advancing a new “socio-bioethics” (Kleinman et al. 1999, …)
  - Learning from the humanities including literature and arts (Thornber 2020, …)
  - Reviving thought and wisdom of indigenous moral traditions
An Approach of Ethical Transculturalism

- Five Theoretical & Methodological Elements (or a CPCDM Approach)
  - Appreciating the complexities of cultural differences, rather than dichotomizing cultures
  - Taking seriously the internal moral plurality and diversity within every culture, rather than homogenizing and stereotyping any society and culture
  - Focusing on not only cross-cultural differences but transcultural commonalities and a common humanity, rather than treating the other culture as “the radical other”
  - Searching for more fruitful methods of genuine and deeper transcultural dialogues, rather than believing in the inevitability of cultural war or clash of civilizations
  - Upholding the primacy of morality, resisting the tyranny of political and socio-cultural practices over ethics,


The Primacy of Morality: King Wen’s Exemplary Polity

- Classical Confucianism
  - Great diversity of Confucianism
  - The need to return to classical Confucianism
    - The primary texts
      - Six Classics 六經, *The Analects* 論語 and *Mengzi* 孟子
- Eldercare as moral practice, as an essential part of *renzheng* 仁政 (benevolent or caring polity)
  - *Meng Zi* (Mencius) 孟子
    - King Wen (文王 1152-1056 B.C.E.): “Shan yanglao” (善養老): Excellence at taking good care of old people
- Later Confucian scholars
  - Zhu Xi 朱熹
  - Wang Quanshan 王船山 in Hunan
• Geras, the Greek God of Old Age
  (Athenian red-figure pelike C5th B.C.,
   National Etruscan Museum)

• Hebe, the Greek Goddess of Youth
  (Hebe carrying nectar and ambrosia, detail of a vase
   painting in the Jatta Museum, Ruvo di Puglia, Italy)
Francisco Goya:
Two Old Ones Eating Soup (or The Witchy Brew) (1819–23)
Saul Steinberg (1914-1999)
Untitled (Stages of Life – Women)
Untitled (Stages of Life – Men)
Old Age in Biomedicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine

- **Biomedicine**
  - The disease model of old age

- **Traditional Chinese Medicine**
  - *Huangdi Neijing* (The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic of Medicine), c. 2nd Century BCE
    - Divides physiological development of man or woman into periods of seven or eight years
    - Women start to decline in their late thirties and men in their early forties
    - In old age, “the body become corrupt and the jing qi (spirit and energy) exhausted”
Old Age as the Summit of a Moral Pilgrimage

- A contrast
  - Radically different from the popular and pervasive perception of ageing in the West as well as China which regards old age as a period of inevitable decline, classical Confucianism treats human life as an ongoing moral pilgrimage, with old age the summit of the lifelong journey.

- Kong Zi (Confucius):
  - At seventy, I follow my heart’s desires without transgressing moral principles.
  - At sixty, my ear was attuned [to Dao, the Way].
  - At fifty, I understood the Mandate of Heaven.
  - At forty, I had no illusion.
  - At thirty, I took my stand.
  - At fifteen, I set my heart to learning.
Meaningful Ageing: The Role of Life-long Learning

- Life-long learning
  - as life-long moral cultivation
- The role of learning in the Confucian moral and social programme
  - E.g. The Great Learning
    - “Three Items”
      - 3rd: Abiding in the highest good
      - 2nd: Loving people
      - 1st: Manifesting the clear character of man
    - “Eight Steps”
      - 8th: Promoting the world peace, or promoting humankind as a moral commonwealth
      - 7th: Governing the nation
      - 6th: Regulating the family
      - 5th: Cultivating the personal character
      - 4th: Rectifying the mind
      - 3rd: Making the will to be sincere
      - 2nd: Extending knowledge
      - 1st: Investigating things
Xiao (Filial Piety) and Its Broader Social Dimension

- Xiao (Filial Piety)
  - The Foundation of morality and socio-political life

- Xiao as a Principle of Social Ethics
  - Meng Zi (Mencius):
    - Treat with the care due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others should be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to children the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others should be similarly treated (老吾老以及人之老，幼吾幼以及人之幼): — do this, and the kingdom will be made to go round in your palm.

- From familial to social
  - Responsibilities of the state and society
  - Empowering individuals and families to care for elderly people

- Xiao as an Norm for Intergenerational Flourishing
A Matter of Justice and Dignity, not Merely Charity

- The “Charity” Approach
  - Are the popular term “ruoshi qunti” (弱势群体, weak groups) and, especially, “guanghuai ruoshi qunti” (关怀弱势群体，caring for the weak groups) approach ethically sound?

- Merits of the charity approach
  - Not straightforwardly denying the problem
  - Having good intention
  - Calling up societal attention

- Ethical pitfalls of the charity approach
  - Confusing and disguising injustice and inequality with misfortunes
  - Endorsing the ideology of victim-blaming
  - Encouraging the spirit of social Darwinism
  - Promoting a patronizing mentality in formulating social polices and programmes
Suicides of the Elderly in China

- Age-, gender-, and region-specific suicide rates, China, 2009-2011 (Wang, Chang and Yip 2014, p.935)
Elderly Suicide in Rural China
Urban-rural inequalities in suicide among elderly people in China (Li and Katikireddi 2019)
Proust, Ruskin, Rembrandt
Rembrandt (c. 1609-1669): Rembrandt Laughing; Self Portrait with Two Circles
Rembrandt:
Aristotle with a Bust of Homer
Rembrandt:
Two Old Men Disputing
Rembrandt: Old Woman Reading
Rembrandt:
Portrait of an Old Woman
Rembrandt:
Return of the Prodigal Son
(1968-1969)
Luo Zhongli: 
Father (1980)
• One may ask:
  • What is the point of bringing in Rembrandt’s paintings in a talk on Confucianism?

• The points are:
  • Rembrandt’s dignified portraits of elderly people vividly illustrate what the insightful Confucian metaphor of old age as the summit of a moral pilgrimage means and aims for.
  • Confucianism endorses and promotes an affirmative attitudes toward ageing and eldercare underlying many great works by artists, both Chinese and non-Chinese.
Conclusions

- Against the popular and pervasive belief on old age as an inevitable or even doomed decline, classical Confucianism defines old age as the summit of a life-long moral pilgrimage.
  - the essential role of learning (moral cultivation) in meaningful ageing
  - the importance of social eldercare and intergenerational flourishing
  - the need to treat eldercare as a matter of human dignity and social justice

- How should ageing and eldercare be influenced by Confucian values?
  - To identify contemporary failings in the area of eldercare
  - To generate novel ideas, inspiration and wisdom for cultivating meaningful ageing and developing ethical eldercare in a more positive and humane way