

Commentary/Essay

**THE PRACTICAL GUIDANCE OF CONFUCIAN
PHILOSOPHY FOR HIGHER ART EDUCATION IN
CHINA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NEW
LIBERAL ARTS**

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The rapid advancement of information technology in China has brought significant changes to its education system, fostering the emergence of interdisciplinary education and new liberal arts. Unlike traditional liberal arts education, the new liberal arts are characterized by their high degree of integration and openness, offering a transformative influence on interdisciplinary education, particularly in fine arts. As the cornerstone of Chinese culture, Confucianism retains profound significance amidst China's rapid socioeconomic development. It continues to serve as a driving force in shaping cultural and educational advancements. Leveraging Confucian theories enables equal dialogue with global cultures and enhances the development of China's educational theory. Consequently, it has become imperative to explore art education through the lens of modern liberal arts informed by Confucianism. This study systematically examines the intersection of art education and Confucian philosophy within the framework of new liberal arts and proposes practical strategies for their application.

Keywords: art education theory, Confucian philosophy, new liberal arts, practical strategies

INTRODUCTION

Chinese culture boasts a rich, extensive, and profound history. It has cultivated,

over thousands of years of development, a distinctive philosophical system that sets it apart from other civilizations. This system emphasizes inclusivity, encompassing spiritual wealth, harmony without uniformity, self-cultivation, and a spirit of open-minded absorption. These principles remain consistent throughout time, offering profound insights into the internal laws of development, the interpretation of art, and the dialectical nature of life and learning.

This philosophical foundation has deeply influenced contemporary art education. In practice, however, the integration of Confucian theory into modern educational frameworks has been hindered by a shortage of high-quality research in this field. As a result, Confucian philosophy has largely remained at a preliminary stage of development within art education, limiting its application across various disciplines.

To address this gap, it is essential to merge Confucian culture with contemporary ideological systems, creating a holistic framework that bridges traditional values and modern academic paradigms. This integration would not only advance the development of Confucian thought but also offer valuable insights for refining art education theories, particularly within the context of the emerging new liberal arts paradigm.

NEW LIBERAL ARTS: BACKGROUND AND CONCEPT ELABORATION

Background of the Construction of New Liberal Arts

The reform of liberal arts education began with the initiatives of the Sloan Foundation in the 20th century, which funded programs aimed at developing new liberal arts. Traditional liberal arts education was increasingly recognized as inadequate to address the demands of rapidly evolving societal and economic development. This recognition led educators to critically assess the contradictions between the progress of social development and the limitations of liberal arts education. Consequently, they began to explore and gradually establish a new field within the liberal arts, known as "global liberal arts." (Li 2021, 105-106)

In China, promulgating the declaration for new arts construction marked the initiation of comprehensive efforts to reform liberal arts education. These efforts were deeply rooted in China's national conditions, characterized by their integration of profound political thought, historical depth, and cultural richness. The ultimate goal of China's new liberal arts construction is to develop a uniquely Chinese philosophical and social system that aligns with the country's cultural heritage and contemporary aspirations.

Chinese Goals in the Context of New Liberal Arts

The term "liberal arts" traditionally encompasses philosophy, social sciences, and humanities, focusing on the study of social phenomena, developmental laws, human emotions, and values. New liberal arts, however, build upon this foundation by introducing a modernized approach that transcends traditional boundaries.

This reimagined framework reflects a comprehensive reassessment of traditional humanities and social sciences, emphasizing adaptability, timely transformation, and self-reinvention. By integrating these principles, new liberal arts aim to foster innovative thinking, create interdisciplinary connections, and align educational systems with contemporary societal needs, all while preserving the essence of traditional cultural values.

THE GUIDING SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFUCIANISM TO THE THEORY OF HIGHER BEAUTY EDUCATION

The Educational Significance of the Consistent Theory in Confucian Philosophy

A key aspect of Confucius' philosophy is illustrated in the *Analects*, particularly in a dialogue involving the Lord Ling of Wei. Confucius emphasizes the principle of "consistency," which underscores the pursuit of deeper understanding beyond surface knowledge. Confucius highlights the importance of a unified and consistent principle that underlies his teachings. This refers to the idea of "Yi Yi Guan Zhi" (一以贯之), which is mentioned in *The Analects (Lunyu)* (Confucius 2002). It means that Confucius' philosophy or teachings are guided by one fundamental principle that ties everything together. It emphasizes the pursuit of deeper understanding and coherence, rather than stopping at superficial knowledge. In essence, it conveys that Confucius advocates for a core principle that connects knowledge, learning, and practice in a harmonious way.

In the text, Confucius guides his disciple Zi Gong, who demonstrated strong developmental potential, to move beyond mere acquisition of facts and engage in profound inquiry to uncover essential truths. This principle can be interpreted as identifying the universal laws governing phenomena, achievable only through continuous practice and exploration. (Fu 2020, 250-251)

In the context of modern art education, this philosophy offers constructive guidance. As Chinese art education matured from its nascent stages, it has become evident that traditional approaches must adapt to technological and societal changes. Art education today necessitates fostering students' social awareness, humanistic values, and sense of service and responsibility. By adopting Confucius' consistent philosophical method, students can explore the overarching principles of art education in the modern era, enabling them to make timely adjustments and cultivate a forward-looking approach. Confucian thoughts and teachings have been consistent in emphasizing several core concepts, such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness, which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing in his teachings. Therefore, Confucius's consistent philosophical method can be understood as the consistency and coherence of Confucius's education and moral ethics, whether it is the cultivation of personal morality or the responsibility to society and family, which reflects this systematic thought. Through this consistent teaching, Confucius hopes to cultivate virtuous and wise talents to achieve social harmony and stability. By adopting Confucius' consistent philosophical method, students can explore the overarching principles of art education in the modern era, enabling them to make

timely adjustments to educational methods, theoretical frameworks, and curricula, while cultivating a future-oriented approach to effectively address societal and technological changes.

Dialectical Thinking in Art Education

Art education, unlike other disciplines, relies heavily on practical and empirical methods. Consequently, the integration of dialectical thinking is essential for its theoretical development. This aligns with Confucian duality, which emphasizes the identification of the root cause of an issue, an examination of the issue's opposing sides, and, ultimately, the search for a balanced and optimal solution.

There are many ways by which dialectical thinking is important to art education. One is in understanding contrast and complementarity. For example, in a painting class, teachers can ask students to explore the contrast between black and white pictures and discuss the relationship between shape and color, light and shadow. Through this contrast, students can better understand the importance of color selection and composition. While understanding contradictions, students also learn how to use dialectical thinking to achieve higher artistic expression of such contradictions. Dialectical thinking can help fuse tradition and modernity. For example, in pottery teaching, teachers encourage students to combine traditional pottery techniques with modern design concepts to create works with personal style. At the same time, through the integration of dialectical thinking, this process prompts students to think about the relationship between tradition and modernity, explore how the two influence each other and create new art forms. Dialectical thinking can help in understanding the relationship between self and others. For example, in a photography class, students can explore the relationship between "self" and "other" by photographing people from different cultural backgrounds. By comparing their own perspective with the perspective of the person being photographed, students can have a deeper understanding of cultural differences and personal identity. The process of learning dialectical thinking helps students realize the relativity of self-understanding and develop a more open perspective.

Dialectical thinking can also help in the evolution of artistic styles. For example, in art history courses, teachers can encourage students to discuss the conflict and integration of artistic styles by analyzing the origins and evolution of different art schools, such as Impressionism and Expressionism. By learning dialectical thinking, students can experience how cultural and social backgrounds affect artistic creation in this process and understand that artistic styles do not exist in isolation but are constantly changing and developing. Dialectical thinking aids in criticism and creation. For example, in music creation courses, students can conduct self-criticism and peer evaluation after creation, thereby developing a deep understanding of musical works. Through dialectical thinking for criticism and self-reflection, students can recognize the contradictions in artistic creation and then constantly adjust and improve their works in creation. Dialectical thinking is important in understanding the interaction between space and objects. For example, in sculpture classes, students are taught how to use the contrast between space and objects to create visual effects, encouraging them to think about the dialectical relationship between "empty" and "full." Learning

dialectical thinking enables students to understand that objects do not only exist in space, but interact with the surrounding environment, thereby creating more profound works. Through these cases and ways of thinking, art education not only cultivates students artistic skills but also promotes their dialectical thinking ability, enabling them to look at the multidimensionality and complexity of things more comprehensively in the process of understanding art.

This approach, rooted in the "Doctrine of the Mean," advocates harmonious decision-making within a defined range and naturally promotes holistic solutions. As stated in *The Analects (Lunyu)*, (2002), Confucius emphasizes balance and moderation as essential principles for achieving harmony." For example, Chinese universities today are increasingly prioritizing practical skills training over purely theoretical instruction. This shift employs a dialectical method to exclude extremes and adopt more balanced strategies, ultimately refining the theoretical framework of art education (Editorial Department 2020, 198-200).

This methodology ensures that art education evolves to meet the demands of modern society, where practical skill sets are as equally critical as theoretical insights. It provides students with a critical framework for navigating the complexities of both creative processes and cultural expectations.

The same principles of dialectical thinking apply to music education. Traditional Chinese music, such as compositions for instruments like the guzheng or erhu, emphasizes structure and adherence to established forms that reflect Confucian ideals of order and harmony. At the same time, modern music education encourages creativity, improvisation, and personal expression. These seemingly opposing approaches can be harmonized through a dialectical framework. For instance, students can be guided to explore how traditional compositions provide a foundation for creative improvisation, blending discipline with freedom.

This balance mirrors the Confucian pursuit of harmony through the integration of opposites, fostering a more profound understanding of both art and music. By applying this philosophy, students can appreciate how structure and innovation coexist, enriching their ability to adapt their skills to diverse artistic and cultural contexts. The inclusion of music education in this dialectical framework not only broadens the theoretical applications of Confucianism but also strengthens the interdisciplinary connections within art education under the new liberal arts paradigm.

The Principle of Harmony Without Uniformity

"Harmony" is a fundamental tenet of Confucian ideology, reflecting the inclusivity and integrative capacity of Chinese civilization. Harmony (*He 和*), as a fundamental tenet of Confucian ideology, is rooted in the teachings of Confucius. In *The Analects (Lunyu)*, (2002), Confucius emphasizes the idea of "harmony without uniformity" (*He er bu tong 和而不同*), which highlights inclusivity and the ability to integrate diverse perspectives while maintaining fundamental principles. This principle embraces diversity while striving for a harmonious coexistence of differing perspectives. At its core, harmony emphasizes strict adherence to principles and truth-seeking through objective analysis rather than speculative or rigid thinking.

In the realm of art education, this philosophy offers a valuable framework for theoretical development. For instance, the principle of "harmony without uniformity" cautions against the unscientific application of educational theories, which can hinder the formation of a unique system for art education in China. Instead, it advocates utilizing traditional philosophical culture as an auxiliary tool to develop diverse educational methods tailored to Chinese art education.

By adhering to this approach, Confucianism can effectively contribute to the creation of a comprehensive theoretical system for art education. This system would incorporate traditional ideas into contemporary art practices, fostering sustainable development while advancing the broader cultural mission of Confucian philosophy. In doing so, Confucianism not only enriches the educational process but also ensures that its values remain relevant and impactful in the long-term progression of art education.

THE CONSTRUCTIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFUCIANISM TO THE HIGHER ART EDUCATION THEORY

Expanding Theoretical Frameworks in Art Education

Within the context of new liberal arts, Chinese Confucian culture has significantly contributed to the evolution of Chinese art, fostering new theoretical approaches and opportunities for art education. Confucianism has facilitated the development of fundamental principles and methodologies in art education, including pedagogy, cognitive theories, ontological studies of art, and explorations into the essence of beauty (Wang 2021).

For example, Confucian philosophy has effectively guided modern art education, which inspires students to innovate and cultivate deeper perceptions of beauty. Confucian philosophy also played a critical role in establishing theoretical schools of art education. These schools have expanded the connotations of art education, leading to the formulation of novel strategies and methods. This theoretical enrichment has become a cornerstone for driving the progression of contemporary art education, ensuring its alignment with modern demands while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Enriching Interpretations of Art Education Theory

Confucianism emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, advocating for a dynamic balance between imagination, innovation, and overall relevance. (Editorial Department 2021, 116-127) This holistic approach provides a robust theoretical foundation for interpreting and advancing modern art education.

By integrating Confucian principles, today's art education not only becomes more nuanced but also cultivates essential aesthetic competencies among students. This enables them to engage in deeper artistic practices and to connect with the philosophical underpinnings of their creative endeavors. Confucianism, therefore, enriches the theoretical framework of art education, ensuring that students gain a comprehensive understanding of artistic concepts and their broader implications.

Infusing Aesthetic Education with Vitality

The influence of Confucianism within the framework of new liberal arts has reinvigorated the field of art education. This philosophical integration has refined theoretical approaches and expanded the practical potential of aesthetic education (Ying Zhilun 2021, 118-119).

For instance, Confucianism has introduced fresh pedagogical perspectives for educators, enabling them to integrate traditional Chinese philosophy into their teaching practices. This fosters the holistic development of students, enhancing their comprehension, cognitive abilities, and aesthetic sensibilities. By promoting a positive philosophical attitude, Confucian principles help students navigate academic and personal challenges effectively, encouraging active participation in the creative process and fostering a thriving educational environment. As such, the role of Confucianism in modern art education pedagogy is indispensable.

Advancing Educational and Teaching Paradigms

The modernization of higher art education in China has been deeply influenced by the integration of Confucian thought. This fusion has led to the refinement of traditional Chinese philosophy within art education, elevating the ideological standards and objectives of teaching (Tian and Guoxia 2020, 125).

Under the new liberal arts paradigm, the teaching content is designed to align with the principles of Confucianism, promoting a comprehensive understanding of art's societal and cultural roles. This alignment not only advances China's social construction and economic goals but also establishes a more realistic and culturally grounded framework for art education theory. The construction of Confucian thought in conjunction with art education, thus, holds immense potential for shaping the future of higher art education in China.

THE STATUS OF CONFUCIANISM IN THE PRACTICE OF HIGHER ART EDUCATION THEORY

Students' Limited Engagement with Philosophical Foundations

Art students often exhibit dependence on technical skills, with limited ways to express the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of their discipline. Many students seek to enhance their understanding of art education theories through their practical skills alone, neglecting the foundational knowledge provided by traditional philosophical frameworks (Liu 2022, 19-20).

For example, some art students fail to prioritize the development of a robust theoretical foundation in art education. They often lack exposure to traditional philosophical thought and rarely engage with essential texts in literature, history, or philosophy. This gap restricts their ability to contextualize art within a broader intellectual framework; furthermore, current Chinese art education primarily focuses

on the utility of art in scientific research, sidelining its cultural and theoretical dimensions. Addressing this imbalance is essential to ensure a more holistic education for art students.

Fragmentation of Knowledge in Art Education

Professional courses in fine arts tend to offer highly specialized training, which, while valuable, often comes at the expense of interdisciplinary knowledge. Students in such programs frequently struggle to integrate liberal arts and cultural studies into their artistic education, resulting in fragmented understanding and limited intellectual versatility. This lack of diversity in their academic pursuits can hinder students' professional growth. Without a unified understanding of different disciplines, their ability to innovate and evolve as artists is constrained. Encouraging a more comprehensive approach to education—one that bridges fine arts with liberal arts—is vital for fostering well-rounded professionals.

Insufficient Application of Comprehensive Cultural Knowledge

Art students often face challenges in applying broader cultural and philosophical knowledge to their creative processes. While cultural courses are included in their curricula, students frequently devote more time to extracurricular activities or technical skill development. This often leads to a shallow engagement with Confucian philosophy and other traditional cultural frameworks, limiting their ability to address theoretical challenges in art creation.

The lack of in-depth understanding of Confucian thought restricts students from fully integrating these principles into their artistic endeavors. As a result, they may struggle to develop innovative solutions or convey profound philosophical themes through their work. Strengthening the role of comprehensive cultural education in art programs is essential for equipping students with the tools needed for meaningful artistic exploration and expression.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR THE APPLICATION OF CONFUCIAN THOUGHT IN ART EDUCATION

Building a New Discipline Model and Advancing Theoretical Construction

In the context of new liberal arts, the evolution of art education and its integration with Confucian philosophy necessitates establishing a new discipline model. This approach aligns with the demands of diversified resource allocation and globalization of information, fostering theoretical advancements in art education (Li 2022, 26-29).

First, interdisciplinary communication and learning activities must be prioritized. This includes developing teaching resources that connect traditional philosophical theories with modern artistic practices, integrating high art with folk art,

and enriching art education's practical applications. Such initiatives can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning and foster a deeper engagement with art.

Second, creating an optimal learning environment is essential. Students should have access to courses that explore Confucian philosophy and its relevance to art education. Expanding the range of elective and required courses can give students broader exposure to traditional philosophical frameworks, enabling them to contextualize their art education within a larger cultural and intellectual narrative.

Here are some suggestions and recommendations:

1. **Art and Humanistic Philosophy:** Combine artistic creation with Confucian philosophy to explore the humanistic thoughts, moral concepts and social responsibilities reflected in artistic works. The course may include the interpretation of classical literature and its application in contemporary art.

2. **Aesthetics and Ethics:** Study the integration of aesthetic theory and Confucian ethical thoughts and explore ethical choices and aesthetic values in artistic creation. For example, analyze how typical works express ethical concepts through beauty.

3. **Art Education and Social Responsibility:** Focus on how art education can cultivate students' sense of social responsibility, draw on the four dimensions of "benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, and wisdom" emphasized by Confucianism, and advocate the role of art in social justice and sustainable development.

4. **Cross-cultural Art Research:** Comparative study of Chinese and Western art traditions and their philosophies, explore the differences and integration between Confucian and Western art views, and cultivate students' global vision and cross-cultural understanding.

5. **Traditional Culture and Modern Art:** Explore and study the relationship between Chinese traditional art (such as calligraphy, Chinese painting, and traditional music) and Confucian culture, and explore the innovation and inheritance of traditional art in the context of the new era.

6. **Social Art Practice:** Combined with the Confucian idea of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the country and pacifying the world", carry out social art practice projects, encourage students to participate in community art activities, and enhance their sense of social participation and belonging.

7. **Creativity and Thinking:** Cultivate students to think critically and express creatively in artistic creation, combine the Confucian idea of "moderation", and guide students to find balance and harmony in artistic creation. Through the integration and development of the above disciplines, it can provide a richer and deeper connotation for art education, making it more meaningful and socially valuable in the context of the new liberal arts.

Adopting a Holistic Approach and Strengthening Practical Integration

Given that art education encompasses various disciplines such as music, dance, film, and television, the concept of "big disciplines" should be adopted to foster integration between Confucian thought and art education. In this paper, the term "big disciplines" refers to an interdisciplinary framework that connects art education with broader academic fields, emphasizing the integration of diverse disciplines to enhance students' learning experience and holistic development. For example, Music, Dance,

and Theater - combining these performing arts disciplines with art education to foster a more comprehensive understanding of creative expression; Literature and History - providing cultural and historical contexts for students to deepen their appreciation of art's societal significance; Philosophy and Ethics - encouraging students to explore the philosophical and ethical dimensions of art, helping them contextualize their work within larger moral and intellectual frameworks; Film and Media Studies - incorporating these areas into art education to explore modern visual storytelling techniques and technological innovation in artistic practice.

This approach aims to expand the scope of art education beyond traditional boundaries, encouraging students to draw connections across fields and think critically about their artistic and intellectual pursuits. A flexible education system could be developed under the new liberal arts paradigm, transforming fine arts education into a program that balances specialization with interdisciplinary breadth. By breaking down barriers between art and other fields, students can explore connections between art education and Confucian philosophy. This enables them to appreciate the philosophical dimensions of art creation and appreciation.

In addition, fostering closer collaboration between art education and disciplines such as literature, history, and philosophy is critical. Regular exchange activities, workshops, and competitions can expose students to diverse perspectives, enhancing their ability to apply philosophical concepts in art. This approach ensures that students develop a comprehensive understanding of philosophy and its practical implications for art.

Exploring New Education Models to Enhance Theoretical Construction

Under the new liberal arts framework, teachers play a guiding role in the educational process, emphasizing the integration of Confucian ideas into their teaching practices. To achieve this, it is crucial to enhance teachers' knowledge of Confucian philosophy through regular professional development and training programs. (Zhou 2022, 1-4)

Simultaneously, a dual focus on students' theoretical knowledge and practical skills is essential. Teachers should encourage students to strengthen their understanding of traditional Chinese culture which will enable them to effectively integrate Confucian philosophy with their artistic skills. This integration fosters the holistic development of students, enabling them to effectively connect Confucian philosophy with their artistic skills and engage with both the theoretical and practical dimensions of art education.

Establishing a New Assessment System for Innovative Practices

In addition to consistently teaching art skills, there is a pressing need to reform traditional teaching evaluation methods. A new assessment system should be designed to encompass not only technical proficiency but also theoretical understanding, particularly the integration of Confucian principles. For instance, alongside evaluations of students' art skills and subject knowledge, assessments should incorporate their ability to contextualize their creations within the framework of Confucian philosophy. A balanced approach combining inspections, written

examinations, practical demonstrations, and interviews can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of both teachers and students.

For instance, a blended assessment approach could involve evaluating students' traditional art projects alongside their ability to articulate how these works reflect Confucian values such as harmony, discipline, and moral integrity. Teachers might also introduce peer-review sessions where students critique each other's work based on both technical skill and philosophical depth, fostering collaborative learning and critical thinking. Additionally, students could be encouraged to develop portfolios that include reflective essays discussing how their artistic practices align with Confucian ideals.

Such an assessment model ensures that students are not only proficient in technical artistry but also equipped with the intellectual framework to understand and express their cultural heritage. This holistic approach aligns with the broader objectives of new liberal arts education, preparing students for both academic and creative challenges in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the integration of Confucian philosophy within the framework of new liberal arts is vital for the continued evolution of art education in contemporary China. As a foundational component of Chinese cultural heritage, Confucian philosophy has endured thousands of years of practice and refinement, offering a rich theoretical framework that remains profoundly relevant.

Confucian philosophy provides unique insights and guiding principles that address the complexities of contemporary art education. By delving deeply into the essence of Confucian thought, educators and students alike can foster a more meaningful connection between tradition and innovation. Integrating these principles into the art education system in the present will not only preserve cultural authenticity but also enrich theoretical foundations, teaching methodologies, and creative processes for both educators and, most notably, students.

Looking ahead, the harmonious synthesis of Confucian philosophy with new liberal arts presents an opportunity to cultivate a generation of artists who are creatively empowered and deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. This approach not only advances the goals of interdisciplinary education but also positions Chinese art education as a global leader in bridging tradition with modernity. By fostering an appreciation of philosophical depth alongside technical skill, students will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of a globalized world while contributing to the preservation and innovation of their cultural identity.

The integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence with Confucian-inspired pedagogies could also further enrich art education and create innovative ways to engage with traditional principles. Interdisciplinary collaborations across different forms of art will open new pathways for artistic expression. This can ensure that Chinese art education remains dynamic, relevant, and adaptable to the challenges of the 21st century.

Through this continued evolution, Confucian philosophy will remain an indispensable pillar of art education in China, fostering creativity, cultural understanding, and intellectual growth in a rapidly transforming world.

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