

Xue and Haoxue: Learning Contents and Learning Attitude in The Analects of Confucius

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The Analects (*Lunyu* 論語) is a fundamental text for understanding the teachings of Confucius and offers an extensive account of the importance and methodology of learning (*xue* 學) in the quest to become a *junzi* (君子), or exemplary person. This paper explores the contents and attitudes of learning as presented in *The Analects*, focusing on how Confucius' disciples and subsequent generations compiled and understood his teachings. Confucius emphasized that the ultimate goal of learning is to become a *junzi*. The term *junzi* originally referred to nobles or aristocrats but was redefined by Confucius to describe anyone who cultivates themselves to achieve moral excellence and serve society effectively. In *The Analects*, the concept of *junzi* is constructed through various entries that illustrate what a *junzi* should and should not do, highlighting attributes such as being highly principled, disciplined, ethical, and capable. Confucius outlined specific content areas for learning that were essential for personal and social development. These included learning cultural knowledge (學文), the *Book of Changes* (學易), the *Book of Odes* (學詩), the *Book of Propriety* (學禮), and the Way (學道). He believed that proper behavior, such as filial piety, respect for elders, trustworthiness, and benevolence, was a prerequisite for effective learning. Through the study of these classical texts, learners could cultivate their emotions, improve their observational abilities, and enhance their social skills. In addition to content, Confucius stressed the importance of having the right attitude towards learning. He valued the enjoyment of learning (好學) and praised those who pursued knowledge with diligence and an open mind. This attitude was exemplified by his favorite disciple, Yan Hui, who was noted for his ability to learn without repeating mistakes or transferring anger to others. Confucius himself also modeled this attitude, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to learning and self-improvement. In conclusion, *The Analects* presents learning as a holistic process that encompasses not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of moral and social virtues. Confucius' teachings emphasize that through persistent and disciplined learning, individuals can achieve personal growth and contribute positively to society, embodying the qualities of a true *junzi*.

Keywords: *The Analects*, Confucius, learning, exemplary man, contents, attitude

Introduction: Learning to Become a *Junzi*—君子學以致其道 *Junzi* Reaches the *Dao* Through Learning

Lunyu 論語, *Confucius' Analects*, is the richest, most direct, and least filtered source through which we can learn about Confucius' life and teaching. After Confucius' death, his disciples and later generations of students compiled and edited his teachings into a collection known as *Lunyu* 論語. “*Lun* 論” refers to the action of going

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thoroughly through what has been gathered, whereas “*yu* 語” means language, speeches, sayings. Hence, the book title *Lunyu* or *The Analects* can be understood as “the collected and edited sayings of Confucius” (Van Norden, 2002, p. 13).

The goal of learning in *The Analects* is becoming a *junzi* (virtuous man; exemplary man). *The Analects* has 107 entries referring to *junzi*, and the meaning of *junzi* is not presented all at once; instead, the concept is constructed by these 107 entries, comparing it with other concepts to highlight who a *junzi* is, what a *junzi* does, and what a *junzi* does not do.

In and before Confucius’ times:

The term *junzi* was originally applied to princes or aristocratic men... In its original meaning, *jun* means a sovereign or a ruler or a lord. During the time of Confucius, China was not a unified country or an empire but consisted of multiple states and principalities. The head of each state was called a *jun*. *Zi* means a son. Therefore, in its original meaning, *junzi* referred to a lord or a prince’s son. In Confucian texts, this term refers not only to the princes but also ministers and aristocratic men whose duty is to govern the state and set an example for the people. As time passes, this word could be applied to anyone, regardless of their birth or wealth, who follows the teachings of Confucius and cultivate themselves to become a better man, a better citizen, and a better ruler/official. (Lin & Htet, 2015)

In *The Analects*, *junzi* is an exemplary, virtuous man who is highly principled, disciplined, ethical, and capable. Before Confucius, the *junzi* was the social role of nobles, officials, and rulers. However, Confucius extended the concept of *junzi* and gave it moral, social, ethical, political, and historical meanings. Zi Xia said, “Craftsmen stay in their shops to accomplish their works. The exemplary men promote their way through learning” (Ch. Zi Zhang, 7). He pointed out that a *junzi* must approach the Way (*Dao* 道) through learning.

Contents and Attitude of Learning in *The Analects*

In Confucius’ mind, *xue* (learning) is the approach to actively becoming a *junzi* 君子 (exemplary man; virtuous man). As a crucial pedagogical concept in *The Analects*, this paper will discuss and category the contents and attitudes of learning in *The Analects*.

The contents of learning are: 學文 learning culture, 學易 learning the *Book of Changes*, 學詩 learning the *Book of Odes*, 學禮 learning the *Book of Propriety*, and 學道 learning the Way.

Xue Er 6: The Master said: “A youth, when at home, should be filial, and be deferential to his elders in the community. He should be cautious and truthful in his words. He should broadly love all and cultivate the intimacy of the benevolence. If by behaving this he still has energy left, he can learn the formal and cultural knowledge”. (學而 6: 子曰: “弟子入則孝, 出則弟, 謹而信, 汎愛眾, 而親仁。行有餘力, 則以學文”。)

The right behaviors are some social performances for becoming a *junzi* in Confucian tradition: *xiao* 孝 “filial piety”; *ti* 悌 “respect elder brothers”; *jin xin* 謹信 “be cautious and trustful in words”; *aizhong* 愛眾 “cherish all people”; and *qinren* 親仁 “get close to the benevolent men”. The shape of character *ren* 仁 meant “two people”. These behavioral codes are significant to define what appropriate social behaviors are, demonstrating that early Confucianism was mainly a performance-language based culture. Confucius believes that one must first behave appropriately on multiple social occasions to be a qualified learner, and then he would start to learn culture as knowledge. Learning certain behaviors is a fundamental part of the learning process. For an adult learner, the meaning of language and notions can only be understood by experiencing their corresponding and related socialized performances. In other words, a learner cannot truly understand new knowledge and concepts without the prior experiences of doing certain things within a Confucian framework.

Shu Er 17: The Master said: “Give me a few more years, I would spend my fifty to the study of the *Book of Changes*, and then I might be free from great faults”. (述而 17: 子曰: “加我數年, 五十以學易, 可以無大過矣”。)

The *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) is the most famous divination work in China, a book in the *wujing* 五經 “The Five Classics”.¹ Confucius believes that if he has more time to learn it, it will help him avoid wrongdoings and significant faults. This entry shows one of Confucius’ attitudes towards learning: It is never too late to learn, but you have to learn something useful in practice.

Yang Huo 9: The Master said: “My young men, why do you not study the *Book of Odes*? The *Odes* can incite your emotions, strengthen your observational abilities, enhance your capability to socialize and express your grievances in the right way. Close at hand you can learn to serve your father, and away at the court you can learn to serve your lord. From the *Odes* you will become broadly acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants”. (陽貨 9: 子曰: “小子! 何莫學夫詩? 詩, 可以興, 可以觀, 可以群, 可以怨。邇之事父, 遠之事君。多識於鳥獸草木之名”。)

Here, Confucius hopes his disciples, those “young men”, study the *Book of Odes* for individual and collective purposes. Individually, the *Odes* can incite learners’ emotions and strengthen their observational ability; socially, it can be applied to communicate with others, to express grievances, and to serve father and lord. In Confucius’ mind, studying the *Odes* is not only for acquiring knowledge of the natural world but also about realizing one’s overall development in a society. The goal of learning is to put what one learned into social practice. For example, during Confucius’ time, the Spring and Autumn era, on diplomatic and ceremonial occasions, participants needed to quote language from the *Book of Odes* to express their intentions or facilitate the process of the ritual and rites activities. This is why Confucius says that studying the *Odes* can “enhance your capability of socializing and express your grievances in the right way. Close at hand you can learn to serve your father, and away at the court you can learn to serve your lord”.

Ji Shi 13: Chen Kang asked Bo Yu, the son of Confucius, saying: “Have you been given any special instruction from your father different from what we have heard?” Bo Yu replied: “No. Once when he was standing alone, I quickly crossed the courtyard with hasty steps, and he asked me, ‘Have you learned the *Odes*?’ I replied: ‘Not yet’. He said: ‘If you do not learn the *Odes*, you will be at a loss in conversation’. I retired and studied the *Odes*. On another day he was standing alone in the same way, when I quickly crossed the courtyard with hasty steps. He asked me: ‘Have you learned the *Rites of Propriety*?’ I replied: ‘Not yet’. He said: ‘If you do not learn the *Rites of Propriety*, you will be at a loss to establish yourself’. I then retired and learned the *Rites of Propriety*. I have learned these two things from him”. Chen Kang retired, and delighted, said: “I asked one question and got three things. I learned about the *Odes*. I learned about the *Rites of Propriety*. I also learned that the exemplary man maintains a distance from his son”. (季氏 13: 陳亢問於伯魚曰: “子亦有異聞乎?” 對曰: “未也。嘗獨立, 鯉趨而過庭。曰: ‘學詩乎?’ 對曰: ‘未也’。‘不學詩, 無以言’。鯉退而學詩。他日又獨立, 鯉趨而過庭。曰: ‘學禮乎?’ 對曰: ‘未也’。‘不學禮, 無以立’。鯉退而學禮。聞斯二者”。陳亢退而喜曰: “問一得三, 聞詩, 聞禮, 又聞君子之遠其子也”。)

Here, Confucius requires his son to learn the *Odes* and *Rites of Propriety*. Learning the two classic books is for gaining prior knowledge and experience in language and profession. In Confucius’ time, his job was to host diplomatic and sacrificial ceremonies and events. On those occasions, it was necessary to quote phrases and language from the *Book of Odes* (as ritualized, conventional expressions) and behave appropriately by following the rules in the *Rites of Propriety*. This is why Confucius told his son that learning the *Odes* was for speech, and

¹ The Five Classics are *Book of Odes*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. These are one part of the traditional Confucian canon. In the West Han Dynasty, these five books were compiled as a set in the collection which titled “Five Classics” (*wujing*, 五經).

the *Rites of Propriety* was for establishing himself in the society (as a Confucian). At the end of the entry, Chen Kang says, “the exemplary man maintains a distance from his son”. This reflects an ideal father-son relationship in Confucian culture. Confucius says: “Virtuous men who are not serious would not have dignity, and what he learned would not be solid” (Ch. Xue Er, 8). Even in a family, a father’s dignity is crucial to being authoritative and encouraging and requiring their children to learn in a disciplined way.

Yang Huo 4: The Master, having come to the small town of Wu, heard the sounds of stringed instruments and singing. He is pleased and smiling; he said: “Why to use an ox cleaver to kill a chicken?” Zi You replied: “In the past, Master, I heard you say, ‘The exemplary man who learned the way loves others (of the *ren* group); the petty, ordinary man who learned the way can be easily employed’”. The Master said: “My disciples, Zi You’s words are right. What I said was just in fun”. (陽貨 4: 子之武城，聞弦歌之聲。夫子莞爾而笑，曰：“割雞焉用牛刀？”子游對曰：“昔者偃也聞諸夫子曰：‘君子學道則愛人，小人學道則易使也’”。子曰：“二三子！偃之言是也。前言戲之耳”。)

Confucius argues that learning the Way (道 *Dao*) differs for exemplary men and petty men, but both aim for good. Learning the Way is not only for gaining knowledge; it is about performing appropriately with other social members in collaborative relationships. On the one hand, Confucius points out the importance of learning the Way for individual development, both for exemplary men and petty men; on the other hand, he emphasizes that the cognitive and social-status gap between the two groups determines their purposes of learning. Therefore, for different kinds of people, the same conduct of learning might have different social meanings for individual developments.

The Attitude Towards Learning: 好學 Enjoying Learning

In *The Analects*, *haoxue* (好學 enjoying learning) is considered as the right attitude towards learning. *Haoxue* is mentioned six times in *The Analects*, referencing *junzi* (Ch. 1, 14), Confucius himself (Ch. 5, 27), Yan Hui (Ch. 6, 3), Kong Wei (Ch. 5, 14), and ideal learners.

Yong Ye 3: The Duke Ai asked: “Which of your disciples has a love of learning?” Confucius replied to him, “There was one Yan Hui who truly loved learning. He did not transfer his anger to others; he did not repeat the same mistake twice. Unfortunately, he died in his young age. Nowadays, there is no such another. I have not yet heard of anyone who is as fond of learning as he was”. (雍也 3: 哀公問：“弟子孰為好學？”孔子對曰：“有顏回者好學，不遷怒，不貳過。不幸短命死矣！今也則亡，未聞好學者也”。)

Here, Confucius describes Yan Hui’s fondness for learning in two respects: In the community, he does not take out his anger on other members of society; for himself, he does not make the same mistake more than once.

Xue Er 14: The Master said: “He who wants to be a virtuous man who does not seek to a full stomach, nor does he seek the comfort and contentment in his dwelling place; he is sensitive in his action, and cautious in his speech; he corrects himself by associating with those who possess the Way:—such a person can be said indeed to be good at learning”. (學而 14: 子曰：“君子食無求飽，居無求安，敏於事而慎於言，就有道而正焉，可謂好學也已”。)

Confucius described the image of a virtuous man in action. In Confucius’ mind, a virtuous man has things he should not do and things he must do, which can be called *yousuobuwei*, *ranhou yousuowei* (有所不為然後有所為), meaning “decide what not to do, and then be sure of what to do”.²

² 離婁下：孟子曰：“人有不為也，而後可以有為”。Li Lou II: Mencius said, “Men must be decided on what they will not do, and then they are able to act with vigour in what they ought to do”. Legge, James. Engl. trans., 孟子 Mencius, 中國哲學電子書計劃, ctext.org/mengzi/zh?searchu=%E4%B8%8D%E4%B8%BA&en=on&page=2.

Gong Ye Chang 15: Zi Gong asked, saying: “Why did Kong Wen get that title of *wen* (refined)?” The Master said, “He was diligent and fond of learning, and he was not ashamed to ask of those who come from lower status—this is why he is called *wen*”. (公冶長 15: 子貢問曰: “孔文子何以謂之文也?” 子曰: “敏而好學, 不恥下問, 是以謂之文也”。)

Confucius tells Zi Gong that Kong Wen’s title comes from his excellent performance in learning. Learning from various sources, even from those who are younger or of lower status, is a merit of being fond of learning. When a good learner finds something worth learning, he approaches it modestly and with an open mind.

Gong Ye Chang 28: The Master said: “In a town of ten families, there may be someone as loyal and true to his word as I, but you could not find anyone who can compare with me with respect to the love of learning”. (公冶長 28: 子曰: “十室之邑, 必有忠信如丘者焉, 不如丘之好學也”。)

Confucius is proud of his love of learning. He says that he started to devote himself to learning at 15 and was still eagerly learning at 50 (Ch. Wei Zheng, 4; Ch. Shu Er, 17). Here, he sets himself as a role model for his disciples. He believes that learning is the way to become an exemplary man.

He also tried to establish himself as a role model of an active, positive learner for his disciples:

Yang Huo 8: The Master said: “Zilu, have you heard the six words that can accompany the six flaws?” Zi Lu replied: “I have not yet”. The Master said: “Sit down, and I will tell you about them. There is the love of acting kindly without the love of learning—the flaw leads to being easily duped. There is the love of gaining knowledge without the love of learning—the flaw leads to self-indulgence. There is the love of making good on one’s word without the love of learning—the flaw leads to harm. There is the love of straightforwardness without the love of learning—the flaw leads to rudeness. There is the love of braveness without the love of learning—the flaw leads to revolt. There is the love of courage without the love of learning—the flaw leads to rashness”. (陽貨 8: 子曰: “由也, 女聞六言六蔽矣乎?” 對曰: “未也”。 “居! 吾語女。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”。)

Zi Lu’s personality is bold and rash. He says, “Why must one read books before he can be considered learned?” (Ch. Xian Jin, 25) Confucius knows Zi Lu’s flaws, so he admonishes him to pay attention to learning. The “six words” are good qualities for individual development. Nevertheless, if there is insufficient learning experience accompanying these merits, it may cause negative consequences. Confucius is proud of his “love of learning” (Ch. Gongye Chang, 28). He hopes his disciples will be active learners because he believes that acquiring knowledge and capabilities comes from learning. He says, “My learning lies in low but aspires to high”, which shows that he considers learning the Way to become an exemplary man.

Zi Zhang 5: Zi Xia said: “A person who knows what he has not learned yet from day to day, and does not forget what he has mastered from month to month—this can be called love learning”. (子張 5: 子夏曰: “日知其所亡, 月無忘其所能, 可謂好學也已矣”。)

Zi Xia believes that learning is a day-by-day, month-by-month lifestyle. He also emphasizes that learning requires persistent efforts to consolidate what one has learned. In his mind, a good learner is someone who knows himself and is aware of what he needs to improve. These are excellent qualities for other learners to emulate.

Conclusion

The Analects offers a comprehensive and nuanced view of learning as a means to achieve the status of *junzi*. This concept is intricately woven through the text, highlighting the importance of continuous self-cultivation,

ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Confucius redefined the concept of *junzi* from its original association with aristocracy to a broader moral and ethical dimension that is accessible to anyone committed to self-improvement. This transformation underscores the universal applicability of Confucian teachings and their relevance beyond social status. *The Analects* emphasizes the content and attitude of learning essential for becoming a *junzi*. It discusses the importance of studying various classical texts and cultural practices, such as the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Odes*, and the *Rites of Propriety*, to cultivate a well-rounded character and understanding of the world. These studies are not purely academic but are meant to be integrated into one's life and actions, reflecting a holistic approach to education.

Confucius also highlights the right attitude towards learning, characterized by *haoxue* (好學 enjoying learning). This attitude is exemplified by figures like Yan Hui and Confucius himself, who demonstrate the virtues of humility, openness, and persistence in their pursuit of knowledge.

In conclusion, *The Analects* presents learning as an essential path to achieve the ideal of *junzi*, emphasizing both the content and attitude required for this journey. Confucius' teachings advocate for a lifelong commitment to learning, ethical behavior, and social responsibility, offering a cultural framework for personal and communal development. By adopting these principles, individuals can aspire to reach the *Dao* and contribute positively to their communities, embodying the true spirit of Confucianism.

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