

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Confucian Wisdom in 孔子说 Kǒngzǐ Shuō: Philosophical Study and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

This study explores the philosophical and contemporary relevance of Confucian ethics through a hermeneutic interpretation of Shen Qiguo's *Kǒngzǐ Shuō: Nǐhǎo!* (孔子说: 你好!). Employing a qualitative philosophical-hermeneutic method, the research examines nine quotations reflecting the five Confucian virtues—仁 (Ren, humanity), 义 (Yi, righteousness), 礼 (Li, propriety), 智 (Zhi, wisdom), and 信 (Xin, integrity)—and focuses in depth on four key quotations: empathy (Ren), filial devotion (Li), learning (Zhi), and self-reflection (Yi/Zhi). Each quotation is analyzed through three interpretive stages: historical understanding, dialogical interpretation, and contemporary relevance. The findings reveal that these maxims form a cyclical ethical structure where empathy nurtures devotion, devotion fosters humility in learning, and learning culminates in self-reflection, which in turn reinforces empathy. This ethical circle demonstrates that Confucian values are dynamic, dialogical, and adaptable to modern contexts such as education, character formation, professional ethics, and organizational culture. The study highlights how hermeneutic engagement with classical Chinese philosophy can provide culturally grounded insights for contemporary moral education and leadership development.

Keywords: Confucius quote, Hermeneutics, Ethics, Character Education, Philosophy of Learning

Introduction

Confucianism plays a key role in shaping ethics, character education, and professionalism in China. The five core values in Confucianism 仁 (Ren), 义 (Yi), 礼 (Li), 智 (Zhi), and 信 (Xin) promote harmonious social interactions and foster individual responsibility towards society. The values of Ren and Li, for example, emphasize love and manners in the family and community, which form the basis of effective character education (Rosidi, 2015) and ethical social practices in the community (Rahmawati et al., 2021).

At the professional level, Confucianism contributes to fostering ethical commitment in the workplace. The concepts of morality and social responsibility contained in Confucianism are believed to strengthen professionalism, especially in the context of law and diverse organizations (Rasaski & Dewi, 2023). This emphasizes the importance of integrity and the ability to manage good professional relationships based on Chinese cultural values (Universiti Sains Malaysia et al., 2020).

In a contemporary framework, Shen Qiguo, through his book 《孔子说:你好!》 (Kǒngzǐ Shuō Nǐhǎo), attempts to bridge the classical teachings of Confucius, commonly found in Lúnyǔ 论语, with modern society. Through a popular and communicative writing style, Shen adapts Confucius's wisdom quotes to explain important concepts such as ethics, morality, and interpersonal relationships in a way that is relevant to today's readers. The main purpose of this work is to facilitate the understanding and application of Confucian values in everyday life, so that the younger generation and the wider community can recognize and apply this rich Chinese cultural heritage. Although there have been many studies on Lúnyǔ and its historical or philological analysis, a hermeneutic approach to the quotations in Shen Qiguo's work 《孔子说你好》 is still rarely found in the literature. In fact, hermeneutic research can explore more deeply the philosophical relevance of Confucianism in a contemporary context by showing how the moral values conveyed by Confucius can be interpreted and practiced in today's social and professional life. This research gap opens up opportunities for in-depth analysis of the interpretation of these values and their application in responding to modern moral challenges (Yi & Fu, 2017) (Dinh & Dung, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that hermeneutics has great potential for exploring the ethical and educational values proposed by Confucius, including in the context of modern moral education (Shaoan et al., 2023). With this approach, researchers can identify the relevance of Confucian values in overcoming social change and moral pressures in the current era, as well as gain insight into their contribution to character building and morality in modern society (Tan, 2021).

Based on this framework, this study focuses on identifying nine quotations from Shen Qiguo's book 《孔子说你好》 that reflect Confucian values. The quotations are then classified into five main Confucian values 仁 (Ren), 义 (Yi), 礼 (Li), 智 (Zhi), and 信 (Xin), and further analyzed using a hermeneutic approach. From the nine quotations, four key quotations were selected for in-depth analysis, namely: empathy, devotion, learning, and self-reflection. This hermeneutic analysis is expected to reveal the relevance of Confucian teachings in the context of modern education, ethics, and society.

Method

Study Design

In this study, a qualitative approach using philosophical hermeneutics was applied to understand the meaning of Confucius' quotations in contemporary social, educational, and professional contexts. This approach was chosen for its ability to offer in-depth interpretations of classical texts, with particular attention to the interaction between the historical horizon of the text and the horizon of modern readers' understanding. The focus of this study is on exploring the meanings contained in Confucius' quotations found in the book 《孔子说: 你好!》 by Shen Qiguo. Through this hermeneutic analysis, the study aims to understand and recontextualize Confucian values within the framework of today's social, educational, and professional environments. Thus, this research not only provides insight into Confucian thought, but also its relevance in a broader context in the modern era. References that can be used include works on hermeneutics, textual studies, and literature related to Confucian philosophy.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Data collection techniques were carried out through a literature study of Shen Qiguo's book 《孔子说: 你好!》 as the main source, with reference to Lúnyǔ 论语 (The

Analects of Confucius) as a comparative classical text. From these sources, nine quotations were identified that represent the main values of Confucianism. Furthermore, from these nine quotations, four key quotations were selected that were considered most representative, namely, quotations that emphasize the values of empathy, devotion, learning, and self-reflection. This selection was based on the representation of themes in the five core values of Confucianism (仁 (Ren), 义 (Yi), 礼 (Li), 智 (Zhi), and 信 (Xin)) and their relevance to modern moral issues.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study was conducted through three hermeneutic stages, which provided a systematic framework for examining the meaning of Confucius' quotations. The first stage, historical understanding, involved tracing the original meaning of the quotations in the context of classical China to gain insight into the position of these values in Confucius' teachings (Absari & Kholili, 2024). In the second stage, dialogical interpretation, a rereading was conducted that opened a dialogue between the text and modern readers, adjusting the interpretation to current moral and social demands (Wells et al., 2021). The third stage, contemporary relevance, emphasized the practical contribution of the quotations to character education, professional ethics, and harmonious community development.

At each stage, hermeneutic interpretation is used to ensure that Confucian values are relevant in facing the challenges of modern society, as well as in facilitating education that supports character development. This approach emphasizes the importance of interaction between historical context and contemporary needs, which in turn is expected to reveal the depth of meaning contained in Confucian thought (Purba, 2022).

Results

In Confucianism, five main moral values form the basis of ethics and social behavior, namely:

1. Ren (仁): Known as humanity or compassion. This value emphasizes the importance of empathy, love, and concern for others. This concept is at the core of Confucius' teachings, calling on individuals to behave well towards others (Rosidi, 2015).
2. Yi (义): Refers to truth and justice. This value requires individuals to do what is right and not only follow social norms, but also adhere to higher moral principles. It reflects the moral responsibility of individuals in their interactions (Rosidi, 2015).
3. Li (礼): Refers to norms or manners related to polite behavior and respect for traditions and elders. Li creates a harmonious social structure and serves as a guide for interactions in society (Ana Rahmalia & Saprudin, 2023).
4. Zhi (智): Refers to wisdom, which is the ability to understand situations accurately and make good decisions based on knowledge and experience. This value encourages individuals to continue learning and developing (Mangesthi et al., 2023).
5. Xin (信): Describes trust and integrity. This value is the basis for strong interpersonal relationships, where a person is expected to be honest and reliable (Mangesthi et al., 2023).

These values are interrelated and form an important moral framework for social, educational, and professional life, as well as their relevance in the context of today's modern society.

The results of the study show that nine main quotations reflecting Confucian values can be identified from Shen Qiguo's book 《孔子说:你好!》. These quotations are then classified into the five core moral values of Confucianism (Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, and Xin). The data is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Quotes Data

No	Quotes(汉字)	Terjemahan	Nilai
1	己所不欲，勿施于人 yǐ suǒ bù yù, wù shī yú rén	Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself.	仁 (Ren) Empathy, ethics
2	德不孤，必有邻 dé bù gū, bì yǒu lín	Kindness is never alone; it always finds companions.	仁 (Ren), 义 (Yi) Social integrity
3	躬自厚而薄责于人，则远怨矣 gōng zì hòu ér bó zé yú rén, zé yuǎn yuàn yǐ	Demand much of yourself and little of others, and you will surely avoid hatred.	义 (Yi) Moral introspection
4	入则孝，出则弟 rù zé xiào, chū zé tì	At home, be devoted to your parents; outside, respect your elders.	礼 (Li) Family and social norms
5	与朋友交，言而有信 yǔ péngyǒu jiāo, yán ér yǒu xìn	In friendship, your words must be trustworthy.	信 (Xin) Integrity and trust
6	君子隆师而亲多 jūn zǐ lóng shī ér qīn duō	A person of noble character is one who respects teachers and is full of love.	礼 (Li), 仁 (Ren) Respect and social relationships
7	见贤思齐 jiàn xián sī qí	See a wise person, then strive to emulate them.	智 (Zhi) Learning motivation
8	三人行，必有我师 sān rén xíng, bì yǒu wǒ shī	When three people walk together, one of them is bound to be my teacher.	智 (Zhi), 礼 (Li) Lifelong learning
9	过而不改，是谓过矣 guò ér bù gǎi, shì wèi guò yǐ	A mistake that is not corrected is a real mistake.	义 (Yi), 智 (Zhi) Self-reflection and improvement

This classification shows that all the core values of Confucianism are reflected in these quotations. The value of Ren (humanity) is evident in the quotations about empathy and virtue; Yi (righteousness) in the quotations about introspection and moral correction; Li (norms) in the quotation about filial piety and respect for teachers; Zhi (wisdom) in the quotation about learning and reflection; and Xin (trust) in the quotation about integrity in friendship. From these nine quotations, this study selected four quotations as the focus of hermeneutic analysis. This selection is based on the representation of core values and their relevance to contemporary moral needs. The four key quotations are:

1. 已所不欲，勿施于人 (Ren – empathy)
2. 入则孝，出则弟 (Li – devotion)
3. 三人行，必有我师 (Zhi – learning)
4. 过而不改，是谓过矣 (Yi, Zhi – self-reflection)

Thus, the results of this study show that although nine quotations were successfully identified and classified into the five main values of Confucianism, the four selected quotations are representative for hermeneutic analysis. The four form a framework of a continuous ethical cycle: empathy influences filial piety both inside and outside the home, makes a person humble enough to learn from anyone, and improves oneself, which ultimately strengthens empathy.

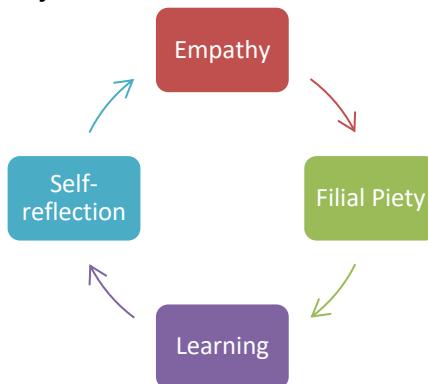


Figure 1. Illustration of the Ethics Cycle

Discussion

已所不欲，勿施于人 (Ren 仁- empathy)

Historical background

The expression “已所不欲，勿施于人” (jǐ suǒ bù yù, wù shī yú rén), which means “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you,” is recorded in the Analects (XV:23). This quote comes from a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zigong (子贡). Zigong, a disciple known for his intelligence, wealth, and diplomatic skills, asked his teacher, “Is there one word that can be used as a guideline for life?” Confucius answered with one key term: 恕 (shù), which means reciprocity, tolerance, or empathy.

Historically, Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), an era marked by feudal fragmentation, political intrigue, and the decline in moral legitimacy of the Zhou rulers. In that context, the social order was shaken, and the people lived in uncertainty. Confucius' teaching on shù emerged as an ethical response to the moral-political crisis. Instead of emphasizing law or military force, he offered a simple but universal principle: harmony can be achieved when people refrain from hurting others in ways they themselves would not want to be hurt (Yu, 2017).

Thus, this quote is not merely interpersonal ethics, but also a political and social formulation. This principle is intended for the people, officials, and kings: good leadership is born not from coercion, but from empathy and a willingness to understand the people.

Dialogical interpretation

The dialogue between Confucius and Zigong in the Analects (XV:23) provides a clear picture of Confucian pedagogy, which is dialogical and reflective in nature. When Zigong, a critical student and intelligent diplomat, asked for “one word” that could serve as a guideline for life, he did not ask about the details of ritual (Lí, 礼), but sought a simple yet

universal moral essence. Confucius' answer with *shù* (恕) emphasizes that Confucian education does not stop at the repetition of doctrine, but invites students to discover the essence of ethics that can guide all actions.

By placing *shù* as the answer, Confucius shows that empathy is the ethical summary of all his teachings, even more fundamental than obedience to rituals. In this case, *shù* functions as a hermeneutic principle: a key to interpreting the entirety of Confucian ethics. This means that other values such as *rén* (仁, humanity), *yì* (义, moral propriety), and *lǐ* (礼, norms) find their meaning within the framework of reciprocity brought to life by *shù*.

Philosophically, *shù* is not merely a passive prohibition against "harming others," but rather an active principle of reciprocity. Tang & Yu, (2023) interpret the practice of *shù* in three forms of *gongfu* (功夫, moral conduct):

- a. *néng jìn qǔ pì* (能近取譬): drawing analogies from oneself as a moral mirror,
- b. *jiāng xīn bǐ xīn* (将心比心): measuring others' hearts with the measure of one's own heart,
- c. *tuī jǐ jí rén* (推己及人): putting oneself in the position of others.

These three forms show that *shù* is a reflective-transformative practice: self-experience does not stop at individual consciousness, but is transformed into a standard for treating others fairly. In a hermeneutic framework, this principle works as a circle of social reflection: individuals interpret their own experiences, then reconstruct social behavior based on a shared horizon with others.

Zigong's role in this dialogue is very significant. As a disciple known for his practicality, he represents the human need for moral guidelines that can be practiced in real life. Confucius' answer is not dogmatic, but rather a contextual pedagogical response: the teacher responds to the student's anxiety by providing universal principles that can be applied in various situations. Thus, this dialogue shows that empathy is not born from rigid doctrine, but from dialogical interactions that shape the student's moral consciousness.

Therefore, "己所不欲，勿施于人" can be understood not only as a moral proverb but as a hermeneutic guideline that reinforces the structure of Confucian education: the core of ethics is born from self-reflection, communicated in teacher-student dialogue, and then internalized as a moral commitment that binds social relations.

Contemporary Relevance

Cross-cultural ethics

This principle is often compared to the Golden Rule of other traditions, such as Christianity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The important difference is that the Confucian version is negative (avoid harm), while the Western version is positive (do good). Angle (2018) asserts that the negative form is actually more realistic in a pluralistic context, as it is easier to agree upon: do not hurt others in ways that you yourself hate.

Modern character education

In education, the principle of *shù* translates into inclusive ethics that foster tolerant and empathetic classrooms. Fairfield & Geniusas (2018) see *shù* as "hermeneutics of empathy" that can be used in multicultural classrooms, helping students understand different perspectives. Fairfield & Geniusas (2018) also emphasize that integrating this value into cross-traditional education strengthens solidarity and openness.

Professionalism and organization

In the business realm, the value of shù is manifested in corporate social responsibility (CSR) ethics. Cheng Low & Ang, (2013) assert that shù encourages organizations to not only pursue profits, but also to avoid practices that harm employees, customers, and society. In other words, the principle of “勿施于人” is a practical guideline for modern governance.

Global ethics

In a conflict-ridden global world, the principle of shù can be read as a universal ethical framework for intercultural dialogue. It teaches that the starting point for harmony is not grand gestures, but rather refraining from harming others. From a hermeneutic perspective, this shows that classical Confucian texts are capable of communicating with contemporary ethics, from humanism to human rights.

入则孝，出则弟 (Li 礼 – devotion)

Historical Background

The saying “入则孝，出则弟” (rù zé xiào, chū zé tì), “be filial at home, respectful outside,” appears in the Analects (I:6). Its placement at the beginning of the book shows that this value is considered the foundation of all Confucian education. Historically, during the late Zhou Dynasty (Spring and Autumn, 770–476 BC), the feudal structure weakened, and adherence to ritual norms (lǐ 礼) declined. Confucius emphasized xiào (孝, filial piety) and tì (悌, respect for elders) as the basis of social ethics. The family was seen as a microcosm of the state: if one was able to maintain harmony at home through filial piety and respect, one was also able to maintain harmony in society and the state (Yan, 2017). Ever since the Han Dynasty, the Classic of Filial Piety (孝经) has been a required text for officials. Thus, this quote not only emphasizes domestic ethics but also functions as a moral-political architecture: the stability of the state is rooted in family devotion.

Dialogical Interpretation

From a hermeneutic perspective, the quote “入则孝，出则弟” can be understood as a dual ethical movement that connects the domestic and social spheres. Xiào (孝, filial piety) is the first moral training, where children learn discipline, respect, and affection through their relationship with their parents. Confucius emphasized that one cannot become a junzi (君子, noble person) if one fails to practice filial piety within the family. At the same time, tì (悌, respect for elders) extends the value of filial piety to the public sphere, creating a harmonious social structure and preventing generational conflict. Hermeneutics of this text reveal Confucius's efforts to connect family emotions (情, qíng) with social rituals (礼, lǐ) so that a consistent moral habitus is formed.

However, xiào is not synonymous with blind obedience. Yan (2017) asserts that xiào should be understood as rational virtue, always related to rén (仁, humanity) and yì (义, moral propriety). Thus, 孝 is an ethical practice that considers context, not merely hierarchy. Confucius himself taught this to his young disciples, emphasizing that moral education begins with those closest to respecting parents and siblings before expanding to greater social and political responsibilities.

Dialogical interpretations emphasize that filial duty is not static, but dynamic and contextual. Xiao (2024) shows that Confucian principles, including filial piety, shape caregiving practices within families, where caregivers navigate their responsibilities by

considering personal circumstances and relational contexts. This is consistent with the concept of filial piety as a reciprocal obligation, rather than a one-sided burden. (Cheung et al., 2020) research on second-generation Chinese in the Netherlands also reveals that expressions of filial piety change in the diaspora: filial behavior is influenced by the interaction between traditional values and contemporary social conditions. Thus, dialogical interpretation allows for a richer understanding of how filial piety is flexibly practiced in various settings.

The emotional dimension is also an important part of hermeneutic interpretation. Zhao & Zhang (2025) argue that the reciprocal nature of family relationships enhances the emotional intelligence of the younger generation. This shows that *xiào* not only demands obedience but also shapes empathy and emotional awareness, which are essential for healthy social interaction. The difference between true filial piety based on sincere love and false filial piety based solely on obedience to norms. This distinction is important because it shows that true filial piety can only arise from authentic affective motivation, not external coercion.

Thus, a hermeneutic dialogue on “入则孝，出则弟” reveals that filial piety is a contextual, dynamic, and emotional reciprocal relationship. It not only represents domestic norms but also shapes broader social structures. This interpretation is relevant in the modern context, where intergenerational obligations need to be understood adaptively: not merely as hierarchical obedience, but as ethical practices rooted in authentic affection, empathy, and respect.

Contemporary Relevance

This principle connects domestic ethics with social harmony, emphasizing that individual morality is built within the family before being extended to society. In the contemporary context, this value has rediscovered its meaning in various fields: education, family, psychology, professionalism, and even the global community.

Character Education and Social Morality

The values of *xiào* (孝, filial piety) and *tì* (悌, respect) remain the foundation of character education. Liu & Zhang (2024) show that Confucian idioms are used in Chinese schools to instill moral discipline, intergenerational solidarity, and social responsibility. Hermeneutic-based education programs enable students to understand filial piety not merely as an obligation, but as a reciprocal relationship. This approach is relevant for bridging moral confusion among the younger generation.

Family Ethics and the Elderly

In modern societies with aging populations, *xiào* has taken on a new dimension. Nie (2021) interprets filial piety as a “long moral journey,” where the pinnacle of virtue is caring for the elderly with dignity. At the same time, research by (Zhao & Zhang, 2025) shows that increasing acceptance of institutionalized elder care does not negate the value of *xiào*, but rather demands a redefinition of obligations in the contemporary family landscape.

Psychology and Mental Health

The Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM) by (Bedford & Yeh, 2021) distinguishes between reciprocal filial piety (based on love and gratitude) and authoritarian filial piety (based on hierarchy). The reciprocal form is more supportive of mental health, cognitive flexibility, and healthy family relationships. Modernization drives a shift from

authoritarian to reciprocal models, indicating a more inclusive and contextual adaptation of filial piety values. Thus, “入则孝，出则弟” in a modern framework is reinterpreted as a reciprocal virtue that fosters psychosocial well-being.

Professionalism and Organizational Culture

The principle of filial piety also finds its form in the world of work. Filial norms in the Chinese migrant community encourage reciprocal mentorship between senior and junior generations, creating sustainable organizations. The value of *xiào* translates into loyalty, respect, and intergenerational responsibility, strengthening a collaborative and inclusive organizational culture.

Emotional Dimension and Cultural Adaptation

The emotional aspect of *xiào* is also highlighted. Zhao & Zhang (2025) assert that the practice of filial piety strengthens the emotional intelligence of the younger generation, fostering empathy and social solidarity. (Shi & Wang, 2019) distinguish between true filial piety (born of sincere affection) and false filial piety (based on external obedience). (Cheung et al., 2020) add that in the diaspora, second-generation Chinese reinterpret filial piety as a moral obligation that is adaptive to the European social context. This demonstrates the flexibility of filial piety values, as well as their consistency as a cross-cultural ethic.

With various contemporary reinterpretations, “入则孝，出则弟” remains a relevant ethical framework. This principle not only maintains the continuity of Confucian tradition but also adapts to modern needs: character education, intergenerational solidarity, psychological health, organizational culture, and cross-cultural adaptation. The shift towards reciprocal filial piety shows that true filial piety is not merely hierarchical obedience, but a reciprocal virtue that strengthens family, community, and modern institutional relationships.

三人行，必有我师 (Zhi 智 – learning)

Historical Background

The expression “三人行，必有我师焉” (sān rén xíng, bì yǒu wǒ shī yān) “if three people walk together, there must be one who can be my teacher” comes from Analects 7:22. In its complete form, this sentence is usually followed by a double pattern: “择其善者而从之，其不善者而改之” I follow the good among them; I use the less good as a mirror to correct myself. Historically, this statement was born at the end of the Zhou Dynasty (Spring and Autumn period), when access to education was very elitist (limited to the nobility), while the socio-political order was unstable. Amidst the limitations of formal educational institutions, Confucius emphasized the democratization of learning resources: teachers are not synonymous with position, status, or institution; teachers are anyone who, through their example or shortcomings, sparks reflective learning (learning to emulate virtue while learning from mistakes). This framework is understood by contemporary Chinese educational idiom studies as an ethos of humility and lifelong learning that has been deeply rooted in Chinese learning culture to this day.

This historical context is important because it shows a paradigm shift: from the monopoly of knowledge by the elite to relational and ubiquitous learning. By stating “there is always my teacher among them,” Confucius placed *xué* (学, learning) as a social practice knowledge grows through human encounters, not solely through formal curricula. This reading is consistent with the mapping of the revival of Confucian education in

contemporary China, where classical values are revitalized to respond to the needs of modern society.

Dialogical Interpretation

The expression “三人行，必有我师” (sān rén xíng, bì yǒu wǒ shī), “If three people walk together, there must be one who can be my teacher,” is one of the Confucian principles that most emphasizes epistemic humility and openness to lifelong learning. Viewed hermeneutically, the phrase “必有我师” contains two complementary modes of learning:

- a. Emulation of virtue (择其善者而从之) the dimension of role models.

The learner strives to integrate the good values found in others through conscious imitation. This requires epistemic humility, namely the awareness that one is always “lacking” and therefore open to being guided by the excellence of others. Recent literature in the philosophy of knowledge affirms that humility is not merely a moral attitude, but also an epistemic strategy that improves the quality of judgment and perspective-taking, a prerequisite for learning through others.

- b. Self-correction via mirror (其不善者而改之) the dimension of reflection.

The bad things seen in others are not used to criticize, but rather as a mirror for self-improvement. In a hermeneutic framework, “others” function as a locus of alterity: through encounters with others, subjects interpret themselves, revise their habits, and reorganize their ethical orientation.

This proverb is not merely practical wisdom, but a Confucian epistemic architecture. Teachers are not the only source of knowledge; anyone we encounter can become a “living text” to be studied. This model confirms that even true teachers remain students who never stop learning.

Dialogical Learning in Educational Contexts

In the pedagogical horizon, this principle gives rise to a symmetrical teacher-student model. The Confucian learning tradition was initially dominated by didactic methods that tended to be passive. However, the spirit of “三人行必有我师” actually encourages more participatory and collaborative learning. When students recognize that their peers can also be sources of knowledge, the learning space becomes interactive and critical. (Tian, 2019) in a cross-cultural study shows that Chinese students studying in America experience a paradigm shift: from waiting for knowledge from teachers to openness to dialogical interactions with peers. This confirms that every encounter is a learning opportunity, in line with the essence of Confucius' proverb.

Mentorship and Peer Learning

This proverb also finds relevance in mentorship. Collaborative reflection and analysis in mentor-mentee relationships enriches the understanding of both parties, as mentors also learn from the mentee's experiences. A similar point is made by (Yang et al., 2023) in their study of medical students: the peer tutoring model not only boosts the tutors' confidence but also shows that each individual brings unique knowledge that can enrich the learning community. Thus, this proverb encourages the understanding that the learning process is always reciprocal.

Embracing Diverse Perspectives

More broadly, this proverb emphasizes the importance of openness to diverse perspectives. (The Education University of Hong Kong & Chan, 2019) asserts that

understanding students with a Confucian cultural heritage requires teaching strategies that accommodate their backgrounds. If students view their peers as “teachers,” then the classroom will become inclusive and rich in perspective. Confucian ethics inherent in this principle reinforce collaborative scholarship, as it recognizes that learning resources can come from anyone, not just formal authorities.

With a hermeneutic approach, “三人行必有我师” affirms that learning is a dialogical process based on humility, openness, and self-reflection. This proverb is relevant in various contemporary contexts: participatory education, mentorship practices, collaborative learning communities, and cross-cultural academic culture. It shapes the Confucian epistemology of wisdom (智), which is built through human interaction as a source of living knowledge.

Contemporary Relevance

21st-century education

Research by (Liu & Zhang, 2024) confirms this saying as a cultural script that supports peer learning and lifelong learning in contemporary China, a learner “seeks a teacher” in every social interaction, so that the classroom becomes a collaborative community of practice. At the theoretical level, Tan, (2021) formulates self-cultivation in learning as a pedagogical orientation: learning is not merely the transfer of information, but rather self-change supported by dialogue, reflection, and repeated action, in line with the pattern of taking what is good and correcting oneself in Analects 7:22.

Epistemic humility and learning innovation.

The “there is always a teacher” framework establishes epistemic humility as a habitus. Recent educational philosophy literature shows that humility increases openness to different perspectives, improves the quality of deliberation, and strengthens social cohesion in the learning space of which are prerequisites for effective collaborative learning. In the context of learning and organizational management, collective humility correlates with adaptive capacity and innovation; in short, a “everyone can be my teacher” culture produces learning organizations that are resilient to change.

Professionalism: reciprocal mentorship, learning organizations, and ethical persuasion

In the workplace, this saying resonates with two-way mentorship (seniors learning from juniors and vice versa), emulation & correction-based after-action reviews, and an open feedback culture. Recent studies on how Analect persuades readers to “become Confucian” show that the text uses a variety of persuasion strategies: exemplification, rational argumentation, and affective processing exactly the practices reflected in 三人行 (managing good and bad examples for self/group transformation). This shows an applicable path for ethical leadership and change communication in modern organizations.

The resurgence of Confucian and cross-cultural education.

Analysis of the resurgence of Confucian education shows how classical values including the ethos of lifelong and peer learning being recontextualized in today's schools and communities. The reinvigoration of 三人行 contributes to cross-cultural dialogue on global competencies and character: humility, collaboration, and reflection.

过而不改，是谓过矣 (Yi 义, Zhi 智- self-reflection)

Historical Background

The expression “过而不改，是谓过矣” (guò ér bù gǎi, shì wèi guò yǐ) comes from the Analects (XV:29), which literally means “A mistake that is not corrected is a true mistake.” This quote was born in the context of the late Zhou Dynasty, when feudal officials often made mistakes without any clear mechanism for correction. Confucius believed that the root of political decline lay in the unwillingness of leaders to correct their mistakes. Therefore, he taught that mistakes (过, guò) are not shameful; what is shameful is the unwillingness to change.

Historically, the practice of self-reflection (xǐng, 省) was already customary in Zhou culture, for example, in daily rituals to assess oneself in social, family, and state relations. Confucius adopted this tradition and developed it into a framework of introspective ethics, in which both leaders and the people were required to examine their conscience and actions. Thus, this quote reflects the transition from external punishment to internal reform as the basis of social order.

Dialogical Interpretation

The expression ‘过而不改，是谓过矣’ (A mistake that is not corrected is a true mistake) shows that the essence of morality does not lie in the absence of mistakes, but in the courage to correct them. Confucius wanted to emphasise that mistakes are not the end of the learning process, but part of the path to self-improvement.

Mistakes as moral boundaries

Confucius did not understand mistakes merely as violations of rules, but as opportunities for self-improvement. Stępień (2017) notes that in the classical Chinese tradition, the resolution of mistakes emphasised correction rather than punishment. Thus, mistakes were seen as a starting point for moral learning, not merely as weaknesses.

Self-reflection as growth

Through this statement, Confucius teaches that a junzi (君子, noble person) is not judged by flawless perfection, but by their willingness to acknowledge mistakes and correct them. Owusu-Ansah (2021) interprets this idea as placing self-reflection at the core of character formation: mistakes are re-examined, acknowledged, and then transformed into opportunities to expand one's moral horizons. Hu & Pu (2024) add that in Confucian education, self-cultivation grows through repeated correction, not the absence of mistakes.

Correction as transformation

Confucius saw correction not only as a practical action, but as an ethical change that shapes new virtues. Ding (2024) emphasises that learning in Chinese philosophy is a continuous practice, where every acknowledgement of a mistake becomes a gateway to transcending oneself. Thus, the process of mistakes becomes correction, then virtue forms a continuous cycle of moral learning.

The social dimension of correction

This expression also has implications for the social sphere. Xiao (2007) shows that Confucian teaching always involves dialogue with students. Mistakes are not seen as

purely personal weaknesses, but as collective opportunities for learning. Thus, correction is not only an individual matter but part of a social dynamic that strengthens shared ethics.

‘过而不改，是谓过矣’ teaches that true error lies not in failure, but in the refusal to improve oneself. This principle places correction at the heart of moral education, both on a personal and social level. By making mistakes an opportunity for learning, Confucian teachings remain relevant for shaping individuals and societies that are open to continuous improvement.

Contemporar Relevance

The expression ‘过而不改，是谓过矣’ is not only an ethical principle in classical texts, but also provides an important framework for modern life. It emphasises accountability, reflection, and continuous improvement, values that are increasingly urgent in a complex global context.

Personal Growth and Accountability

In the individual sphere, this proverb affirms that mistakes are part of the learning process, while failure to improve oneself indicates a lack of accountability. Owusu-Ansah (2021) shows that the Confucian idea of self-improvement is in line with the principles of modern positive psychology: reflection on mistakes encourages a growth mindset and personal resilience. Thus, junzi are depicted not as flawless individuals, but as those who turn mistakes into opportunities for moral transformation.

Organisational Learning and a Culture of Correction

In modern organisations, this principle translates into a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. The importance of feedback loops in education and organisations, where mistakes are treated as opportunities to improve the system, not to be hidden. If organisations ignore correction, they risk stagnation and loss of relevance. Conversely, by adopting a culture of openness to mistakes, organisations build trust, innovation, and sustainable competitiveness.

Social Responsibility and Public Policy

At the social level, this proverb teaches the importance of correcting collective mistakes. Confucian ethics emphasise correction over punishment, a principle that is relevant in contemporary public governance. In the context of policy, the government's failure to correct past mistakes such as social injustice or environmental damage can exacerbate problems for future generations. Conversely, acknowledging and correcting mistakes can strengthen the moral legitimacy of institutions and foster public trust.

Global Ethics and Contemporary Challenges

This proverb also resonates in the realm of global ethics. Climate crises, pandemics, and geopolitical conflicts show that many human mistakes lie not in initial errors, but in the slowness to correct them. The contemporary Chinese philosophical practice demands continuous improvement as a form of moral responsibility. Thus, ‘过而不改’ can be read as a universal ethic that calls for collective action: a world that is reluctant to correct its past mistakes will bequeath greater disasters to future generations.

‘过而不改，是谓过矣’ remains relevant as a cross-generational guideline. It teaches that mistakes are not weaknesses, but rather a mirror for self-improvement. For individuals, this proverb fosters accountability and moral resilience; for organisations, it

shapes a culture of correction and innovation; for global society, it demands responsibility to correct collective mistakes for the sake of a sustainable future. Thus, this quote presents universal values that bring together classical wisdom and contemporary ethical needs.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Shen Qiguo's 《孔子说：你好！》 effectively mediates classical Confucian wisdom for contemporary readers and that a philosophical-hermeneutic reading can recover both the depth and the present relevance of its quotations. Classifying nine quotations into the five core virtues Ren (仁), Yi (义), Li (礼), Zhi (智), Xin (信) and then examining four keystone quotations in depth (empathy, filial devotion, learning, self-reflection) reveals an ethical cycle: empathy (Ren) grounds relational sensitivity; devotion (Li) socializes that sensitivity within family and society; learning (Zhi) sustains humility and openness to others; and self-reflection (Yi/Zhi) converts error into moral growth thereby reinforcing empathy. This cyclical dynamic demonstrates that Confucian ethics is not a static rule-set but a processual practice of character formation.

Historically, each quotation emerged from concrete pedagogical dialogues and sociopolitical tensions of late Zhou China. Reading them alongside Lúnyú clarifies why reciprocity (恕), filiality (孝/悌), peer-learning, and correction after error were framed as public remedies for disorder. Dialogically, these sayings operate as compact pedagogical maxims that guide learners to interpret lived experience, align affect (情) with ritual (礼), and convert social encounters into occasions for self-cultivation.

Contemporarily, the findings indicate robust applicability. For education, 恕 underpins inclusive classrooms, while 孝/悌 supports intergenerational solidarity and character education aligned with the reciprocal (rather than authoritarian) model of filial piety. For professional practice and organizations, legitimate reciprocal mentorship, peer learning, and cultures of accountability and continuous improvement. For public life, they offer a minimal yet actionable ethical baseline suitable for plural societies and policy design.

At the same time, several limitations are acknowledged. First, the present analysis relies on Shen Qiguo's curated presentation of the Analects and selected scholarly lenses; it does not exhaust alternative commentarial traditions. Second, the empirical references to educational or organizational outcomes are drawn from secondary literature rather than field interventions anchored to these four quotations. Third, the study is text-centric; it does not include participants' reception data to evidence how readers actually appropriate the sayings. Even with these boundaries, the study demonstrates that a carefully staged interpretive approach can connect Confucian classics to current debates in education, HR/management, public ethics, and sustainability, providing conceptually clear and culturally sensitive guidance.

Suggestions

To close the research gap and open up directions for further research, it is recommended that subsequent studies expand the analysis using several approaches: first, examining other Confucian quotations from Shen Qiguo's work 《孔子说：你好！》 and other classical sources to obtain a more comprehensive spectrum of values; second, conducting comparative studies across ethical traditions, for example, comparing the value of cooperation in Indonesian culture, to enrich cross-cultural dialogue; third, applying empirical methods such as surveys or case studies in schools, organizations, or communities to see the extent to which these values are implemented in practice.

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